

CHAPTER ONE: Ajami Literatures and Literacies and Local Islamic Discourses

1. Ajami Literatures as Local Knowledge Production and Ajami Texts as Sources

Ajami literatures and literacies stand out as a set of primary sources that may be used to confront two major problems faced by scholars of Africa. The first, often lamented by researchers in many different disciplines and subjects, is the dearth of internal primary sources, produced by African actors, that can inform us about facts and feelings on the ground from the perspective of the people involved in, or living through, certain events or circumstances. Too often in historical research on Africa, our accounts of events and their background contexts are dependent on sources produced by cultural outsiders, such as colonial officers or their agents, traveling merchants or foreign emissaries, etc. Such sources, which often do not stray far from their original (usually political or economic) concerns, can be frustrating for their lack of detail and potential lack of accuracy. In many cases the writers of these sources were themselves depending on hearsay, left at the mercy of their informants because of their physical and cultural distance from the events they describe, and further constrained by their own ignorance, prejudices, or desires to write what their target audiences wished to read. In historical as well as contemporary social research, attempts to document insider voices and collect data (whether quantitative or qualitative) are also problematized by the researcher's presence as a factor affecting the environment, and by the act of research as an artificially constructed activity, one in which the terms of discourse and its interpretation may be largely set by the researcher, informants may be highly suspicious of researcher motives and so

protective of their own knowledge, and researcher and informant may subconsciously collaborate to arrive at “right” answers. Ajami texts, while their writing and reading must be interpreted in their cultural contexts in order to be understood, have the possibility of serving as more “organic” primary sources, which were originally written by and intended for members of the same cultural group.

Ajami literatures are also important because they refute the persistent association of Africa with “oral” cultures, and the narrative that states that European actors were the first ones to put African languages to writing. This discourse, which implicitly depicts Africans as willfully anachronistic, refusing to accept the technology of literacy which appears in our minds as fundamental to civilization and progress (or development), aids in continuing to set Africa and Africans apart as outliers, unusual exceptions to the general sway of human culture and history, which kind of thought has motivated continuing desires to intervene in Africa, while at the same time marginalizing African ways of understanding. Even with recent ethnographic approaches to the study of literacy, which highlight the need to understand reading and writing as cultural practices whose meanings are dependent on cultural contexts, and critical evaluations and analyses of postcolonial development literacy programs, which together have weakened the discourse of literacy as an automatic technology, the depiction of Africa as completely unlettered until outsiders came to do for Africans what they had not done for themselves does much to deny Africans their own agency. And since the meanings of reading and writing, and often the texts themselves (even in African languages), are brought in from outside, any instances of literacy practice (or even thinking about literacy) serve as

reminders restating the master-pupil relationship and result in a denial of voice, of self-expression, of ownership of literacy. Ajami literacies, although they inherited much of their meaning, form and content from Classical Arabo-Islamic literacy practices, have in many cases opened beyond the constraints and concerns of the local elites who introduced them to foster new discourses of social commentary and criticism as well as new genres of popular literature, and have proved fertile grounds for blending with local knowledge and literatures.

For the most part, however, Ajami literatures are conspicuously absent from the scholarly literature. Historians of West Africa, especially those dealing with Islam, tend to focus almost exclusively on Arabic sources, which are constrained in their perspective to the Arabophone intellectual elite capable of writing and reading them. Colonial archival documents, the second significant historical source, also focus heavily on political elites and issues of rule. Oral sources for history are generally considered doubtful and too malleable to the contemporary context of the telling, often a fair concern in the absence of evidence that helps unpeel the layers of historical interpretation. While a few works have compared oral sources to other available evidence, oral sources are generally considered useful either for contemporary anthropology (how people in the present create the past) or literary studies (collections of oral epic traditions, etc.). The result is that many of the momentous social movements of the past few centuries, including the many popular Islamic reform movements which took place throughout the region and the sorts of economic changes and social upheavals which characterized the periods leading up to and during colonial conquests, are often described only in terms of

ruling elites and movement leaders and their interactions with colonial agents. This approach to historical narratives leaves those who populated and gave force to the region's social movements as hapless reactors to their political and economic circumstances; it does not touch the discourses and ideas that various actors used to make sense of their worlds and choose their courses of action.

While such a rich view of history is itself more often than not an unreachable ideal, and scholars will often hesitatingly offer their best conjectures about popular motivations, Ajami sources might give us some opportunities to address this gap. The Ajami texts already at our disposal include writings from non-elite authors, authors who could not or chose not to compose in Arabic, sources of cultural authority unrecognized or marginalized by colonial sources, and writings from intellectual elites intended for local popular audiences. In current as well as historical studies, there are many spaces in which Ajami texts might provide us with windows onto local discourses and thought, understandings and concerns both individual and social.

2. The Islamization of Sudanic Africa and the Beginnings of Ajami

The genesis of Ajami literacy springs from the spread of Islam in Sudanic Africa, the presence of which is attested as early as the 5th century AH / 11th century CE in Sahelian frontier states such as Ghana in present-day Mauritania and Mali, Gao along the Middle Niger and Takrur along the Senegal River.¹ Scholars tend to agree on a general outline of

¹ Such references are found first in the secondhand accounts of the Arab geographer al-Bakrī, then later in other geographies such as those of Yāqūt and al-Idrīsī. For introductions to the subject of the *Bilād al-Sūdān* in medieval Arabic geography, see John O. Hunwick, Claude Meillassoux and Jean-Louis Triaud,

the trajectory of Islam in West Africa. Islam was first introduced into the region by merchants from the North – Arab, Berber, and Arabized Berber traders who came to trade in commodities such as kola nut, gold, woven textiles and salt. While some historians have characterized this commodities trade as the main thrust of Islamization in the region, and focused on kings and other elites who maintained economic and political ties to Islamic states while practicing a “mixed Islam” among themselves, others have argued that a clerical tradition held an important presence from the very beginning, involving prayer, healing, teaching and preaching among non-Muslims as well as Muslims. This interpretation offers an equal place to the roles of scholar and saint or holy man alongside that of merchant, and presents prayer rituals and spiritual artifacts for blessing and protection (and the Islamic cosmological and theological ideas and scriptural sources which sanction their creation) as “products” circulating in the region with equal or greater value than the above-mentioned commodities. The adoption of such practices and artifacts naturally requires the elaboration of local discourses through which they can be understood – that is to say the presence of Islamic ideas in local languages spreading beyond the foyers of Arabophone intellectuals.

As we move forward centuries from the first presence of Islam in the region, we see the emergence of centers of Islamic learning, the most renowned of these being Timbuktu. The orientation of these centers of learning and their relationships to the rest of the region is again a subject of debate. Since the majority of known manuscripts from

“La géographie du Soudan d’après al-Bakrī: trois lectures,” *Révue Française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer* 66 (1979): 111-38; Vincent Monteil, trans., “Al-Bakri (Cordue, 1068), Routier de l’Afrique blanche et noire du Nord-Ouest,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire* B 30 (1968): 39-116; and John O. Hunwick, “A Region of the Mind: Medieval Arab Views of African Geography and Ethnography and Their Legacy,” *Sudanic Africa* 16 (2005): 103-136.

these centers are written in Arabic, and tend to deal with the classical orthodox subjects of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *sunna* (Prophetic tradition), some scholars have characterized Timbuktu and other centers of learning as strictly Arabophone milieus, in which students first devoted many years to the mastery of Quranic and Classical Arabic, and then went on to advanced studies of the exoteric disciplines in schools where discussions were held entirely in Arabic. This depiction presents a society whose members express the Islamic ideal of equality in part through assimilation to the Arabic language and the abandonment of their non-Muslim languages and cultures.² In this view, the world beyond these great bastions of Arabo-Islamic culture is a great periphery, in which Islamic beliefs and practices have been, at best, superficially appropriated by local cultures.

A contrasting view sees such great centers as Timbuktu as foci which families of scholars migrated to, but which they also left in order to pursue their futures and spread the word throughout the region as itinerant scholars, sometimes staying for a few years to teach in one place before travelling on, and sometimes settling down.³ This view, which focuses on clerical lineages as central actors in the Islamization of the region, also argues that itinerant preacher-scholars practiced a pacifistic and tolerant tradition of open

² John O. Hunwick, *West Africa, Islam and the Arab World* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener), 2006.

³ Lamin Sanneh, *The Jakhanké Muslim Clerics: A Religious and Historical Study of Islam in Senegambia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 160-3, notes the role of peripatetic teaching and learning among a major clerical group in the region. Cornelia Giesing and Valentin Vydrine, *Ta:rikkh Mandinka de Bijini (Guinée-Bissau): La mémoire des Mandinka et des Sòoninke du Kaabu* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 320, note that the Baayoo of Bijini (Guinea-Bissau) and other Baayoo families of Senegambia trace their lineage to Muhammad Bagayogo of Timbuktu, a teacher of the famous Shaykh Ahmad Baba. For more on Muhammad Bagayogo, see John O. Hunwick, "A Contribution to the Study of Islamic Teaching Traditions in West Africa: the Career of Muḥammad Baghayogho 930/1523-4 – 1002/1594," *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* 4 (1990), 149-63.

interaction with local populations, offering to perform prayers and create talismans for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and often making their living from a combination of Islamic education and spiritual consultation.⁴ It was the continued presence of such clerics throughout the region for generations, it is argued, which introduced Islamic ideas and practices into local worldviews. This view focuses much more on the hagiographic than the scholarly, presenting practitioners of Islam as sources of *baraka* who earned a place among the people they lived with by demonstrating the effectiveness of their prayers.⁵ Their work would again create situations of Islamic ideas within local discourses which may evolve into local Islamic discourses.

Vincent Cornell has described how the work of social scientists dealing with Morocco has continually put forward views of Moroccan Islam as rural and parochial in character, dominated by the *marabout*, a popular figure whose charisma holds people in awe and who is less concerned with the universal principles of Islam than with the political and social structures of the local landscape.⁶ An implicit dichotomy is drawn between a central, cosmopolitan world of Classical Islam in which intellectuals think and write on

⁴ Ousmane Kane, *Intellectuels non europhones* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2003), offers groups such as the Kunta lineage, the Sanhaja and Zawaya Berbers, semi-nomadic Fulbe Muslims, the Jula/Wangara Mande Muslim trader diaspora of the Ghana and Mali empires (including the Jakhanke, a related group of descendants of the 16th century community of al-Hajj Salīm Suware Siise), as primary actors in the spread of Islam in the region. As attested by European travel accounts such as those of Richard Jobson and Mungo Park, clerics from such groups even in semi-rural areas were respected by Muslims and non-Muslims in part for their practice of crafting talismans.

⁵ One of the most famous stories demonstrating this possibility is that of the conversion of the king of Mali, related by al-Bakrī. The land was suffering from an extended drought when the king, desperate for a solution, turned to a visiting Islamic scholar for help. The scholar made a condition that if the drought was ended, the king must destroy his idols and become a Muslim. The king accepted, and on the night before Friday, the cleric took him to the top of a hill and bade him follow his bowings and prostrations as he performed the Islamic ritual prayer for rain, *ṣalāt al-istisqā*, until the dawn. When the daybreak brought rainclouds, the king converted. Retold in Lamin Sanneh, "The Origins of Clericalism in West African Islam," *Journal of African History* XVII, 1 (1976), 51.

⁶ Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), xxvii-xliv.

abstract issues of theology, ethics and mysticism, and a peripheral world of popular belief in which reason is trumped by supernatural feats. In order to contest this view, Cornell has argued that Moroccan saints took part in the same international movements and debated the same universal principles as their colleagues in the Near East and elsewhere. Furthermore, he argued, the focus on asceticism, acquisition of esoteric knowledge, and participation in extra-rational phenomena that characterize the biographies of Moroccan saints are all not only possible within the realm of Islamic orthodoxy, they represent dedicated adherence to values shown in the Quran and *sunna* which have commonly been seen as central throughout the history of the Islamic world. If anything, Cornell's description of perceptions of Islam in Morocco applies equally well in West Africa, where the concept of *Islam noire* put forward a century ago by Paul Marty and others can continue to inform explorations of religious institutions primarily as structures of political, economic and social control.

The central place of Sufism among Arabophone intellectuals in the West African Islamic tradition is affirmed by the catalogs of Arabic manuscripts which have been undertaken in Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. While it is no surprise that religious subjects dominate the catalogued works, manuscripts dealing with the mystical sciences and spiritual discipline (*taṣawwuf*) are among the most numerous in many collections, only less common than works on scripture and jurisprudence.⁷ Alongside entries for sermons and works on theology, Arabic language and grammar, poetry and rhetoric, one may find other genres pertaining to the mystical and esoteric, such as prayer

⁷ Kane, *Intellectuels non europhones*, 9-17.

litanies (*dhikr*), invocations (*du‘ā*), spiritual therapies (prophetic medicine, *ṭibb al-nabawī*) and esoteric formulas (*fā‘ida*). A final genre usually found in West African Arabic libraries is that of the “old sciences” (*‘ulūm al-qadīm*), geography, mathematics, astronomy and astrology.

This mapping of Islamic domains of knowledge operative in the region can help us to conceptualize the spread of ideas from the Islamic world among the broader population, as people would gradually adopt ideas and practices according to their existing worldviews as well as their needs. While the phenomenon need not always be as dramatic as the story of the conversion of the king of Mali (see footnote 5 above), one can imagine how prayer therapies and various strategies for healing, protection, blessing, and otherwise navigating and manipulating the unseen forces of the universe could be at least equally as important as trading in goods. While the entrepreneurial spirit of the Islamic ethos and the gains of trade played a central role in the spread of Islam in the region, so too must have the practical employment of spiritual knowledge, as well as the emphasis on the moral and spiritual value of asceticism, selflessness, generosity and communitarian spirit that characterize Islamic ideals. For Islamic practitioners to share blessings among non-Muslims, and to offer them whatever Islamic ideas and practices might fit most easily with their own, is also in complete conformity with the *sunna* of the Prophet, who preached patiently for years among his own people of Mecca and to other Arabs traveling through, answered people’s questions by trying to reach them at their own understanding, and offered gifts to his former enemies after the Muslim victory in

Mecca “in order to soften their hearts.”⁸ With this view, one can see how the Wolof word *sëriñ*, Islamic cleric or practitioner, could be derived from the Arabic *mubashshirīn*, “bringers of good news,” heard as “bischerijs” by Portuguese travelers in the kingdom of Jolof as early as 1508.⁹

One of the oldest found manuscripts containing Ajami writing is a copy of the Quran from Bornu with marginal notes in Kanembu offering explanations of the verses, dated to the second half of the seventeenth century.¹⁰ There are several reasons why this kind of text might be the oldest example of Ajami we can find, all related to the importance of the Quran within Islam. As the direct revealed Word of God, the Quran is considered the most important text for any Muslim to learn, containing the most valuable and beneficial knowledge for success in this life and the next. The idea of the Quran as divine Scripture, not human discourse, provides a sacred quality to the words in their written and spoken forms, and leads to the inviolability of the Quranic text as well as the emphasis on recitation in Arabic which have always been central elements of Islam. Thus, while “reading” is the central notion behind the Quran itself, it is very different from the

⁸ See al-Tabarī, *The History of al-Tabarī (Kitāb al-masālik wa al-mamālik)*, vol. 9 (*The last years of the Prophet*), tr. Ismail Poonawala (Binghamton, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 31-7, for the prophetic tradition of leniency and sharing gifts in order to soften hearts. The prophetic sayings which comprise the *sunna* were always given to fit the context of those listening and their understanding, and this principle was true even in some cases of Quranic revelation: the context for the sending down of the famous *Sūrat al-Ikhlās* (Quran 112), “Say: God is One, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to Him” (tr. Dawood), is said in the *tafsīr* literature to have been in response to a question from a coarse Bedouin, who had asked for the tribal pedigree of Muhammad’s God.

⁹ See P. E. H. Hair, “An Ethnolinguistic Inventory of the Upper Guinea Coast before 1700,” *African Language Review* 6 (1967), 34.

¹⁰ A. D. H. Bivar, “A Dated Kuran from Bornu,” *Nigeria Magazine*, July, 1960, 199-205. There are references to Ajami being used to write texts in Tamasheq languages much earlier (the 12th century) by a scholar-saint of Sus in Morocco (see Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*, 97), and also in the 15th century in the Southern Sahara: see David Gutelius, “Newly discovered 10th/16th century ajami manuscript in Niger and Kel Tamasheq history,” *Saharan Studies Association newsletter* 8 (2000), 6.

modern conception of reading most commonly perceived and practiced in the West.¹¹

The power and blessing contained in the act of invoking divinity by breathing voice into divine words is in itself more important than reading the verses for their ideas or rational meanings, and therefore the classical Islamic education throughout the Islamic world has focused first on learning to recite the Quran for ritual prayers and invocations. After learning to properly recite from the Holy Scripture, however, the need to understand it remains one of the next most important goals, although its formal pursuit within Islamic institutions has usually been reserved to a minority of advanced scholars. The complexities and difficulties of the Quranic text are such that mother tongue explanations can clear up ambiguities much more easily than those written in the same language as the text itself, perhaps especially in a situation where there is an increasing number of students who want to be able to enhance their belief and practice without spending the years required to master Arabic lexicology and grammar. Finally, the importance of the Quran means that Quranic manuscripts would benefit more than any other writings from efforts toward historical preservation, so that even if there were other writings in Ajami from the same time, they are more likely to become lost to the damages of time and the environment.

The Bornu Quran confirms several things about the Islamic community of Bornu at the time. First, there existed a community of Arabophone scholars with the knowledge and resources to copy the Quran. Second, these scholars were well-versed in *tafsīr*,

¹¹ The word said to be the first in the chronology of Quranic revelation is *iqra' a*, an imperative “read” or “recite” (Quran 96:1). The word *qur'ān* itself comes from the same root (*q-r-*) and conveys a meaning of “collection of readings or recitations.”

Quranic interpretation, one of the fundamental advanced disciplines of Islamic education in the regional tradition, usually coming after memorizing the Quran and studies of *fiqh* or jurisprudence.¹² Third, a need was felt to write down *tafsīr*, whether syntactical clarifications or contextual anecdotes, in the local language rather than Arabic, amounting to a record of a localized Islamic discourse.

While this last point demonstrates the existence of advanced-level Islamic knowledge in an African language, as well as the desire to spread that knowledge further within the society, it also raises many questions. Who wrote the *tafsīr* notes in Kanembu, the scribe copying the Quran or some other, perhaps more advanced, scholar? Were these explanations being devised at the time of writing, or was this the commitment to writing of an already existing and agreed upon oral tradition of scriptural interpretation in the local language? Who were the intended readers – scholars fully literate in Arabic who should be able to explain the meanings of Scripture to an uneducated audience, or Muslims with a basic education who could recite the Quran and read the Arabic script but who could not understand what they read in Arabic? Were these *tafsīr* notes written in Kanembu read aloud and discussed, and if so where, in sermons, in Islamic educational institutions, and at what level? Different answers about the circumstances in which the Kanembu marginal notes were written, the social and geographical spread of potential readers and their level of education, and most importantly the contexts of reading offer us

¹² The science of *tafsīr* generally deals with the historical contexts in which verses were revealed, cross-references with other verses of Quran or with *ḥadīth*, attempts to clarify lexical or syntactical ambiguities, and other such issues of interpretation. While the classical canonized *tafsīrs* deal mostly with exoteric or literal issues of interpretation, esoteric or mystical forms of *tafsīr*, addressing secret anagogical, numerological or other meanings, interpretations and uses of Quran have had an undeniable impact on belief and practice throughout the history of the Islamic world, including notably in Sudanic Africa.

different visions of the scope of Islamic beliefs and practices in the area. Even without such information about the contextual circumstances of reading, however, the marginal *tafsīr* texts themselves offer valuable evidence of how Muslims were interpreting and using the Quran.

3. The Case of Swahili

One of the oldest known and extant Ajami literary works is the Swahili *Hamziyya*, attributed to the poet Aidarūs and dated by Knappert to 1162/1749 at the latest.¹³ The *Hamziyya* is a translation of a 456-line Arabic poem in praise of Prophet Muhammad composed by Būṣīrī (608/1213-696/1296), an Egyptian of Berber descent who is perhaps the most famous eulogist of the Prophet in all of the Islamic world for his better-known *Qaṣīdat al-burda* (Ode of the Mantle). In the same way that the Kanembu *tafsīr* demonstrated a body of advanced Islamic knowledge being explained in the local language, the *Hamziyya* demonstrates the translation into local discourse of a key text, and therefore the existence of a key element, of Islamic popular culture: devotion to the Prophet Muhammad. Nearly all of the elements with which Muhammad is praised in the work come neither from the Quran, nor from the oral traditions of the *ḥadīth* attested as sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) that form the basis of jurisprudence, but rather from the more literary genre of Prophetic biography (*sīra*), which brings to the fore the extraordinary feats which prove Muhammad's election as the pinnacle of creation (*khayr al-warā'*). The excerpt

¹³ Jan Knappert, "The Hamziya Deciphered," *African Language Studies* 9 (1968):52-81. Knappert also gives a possible date for the work of 100 Hegiric years earlier (1652 CE), and hypothesizes from genealogies that Aidarūs's death should not be placed before 1700 CE, but the date of 1162/1749 matches the colophon found in one of the manuscripts he worked with.

from the opening of the *Hamziyya* presented by Knappert presents two very important theological elements of devotion to the Prophet: the idea that he was endowed with complete and absolute Knowledge of all things seen and unseen, and the idea that he was pre-eternally created and elected and continues to live, hidden from view until the Day of Judgment.¹⁴ It goes on to relate miracles surrounding Muhammad's birth, like the toppling of the pillars of Khosroes (Arabic *Kisrā*, Swahili *Kisari*), the extinguishing of all the fires in the Zoroastrian temples, and the appearance of a bright star that lit up the horizons marking the future borders of the Islamic empire. It also includes the episode from his weaning among desert nomads in which a mysterious figure (identified as *Jibrīl*, the archangel Gabriel) opens his chest and removes a black spot, thus purifying him of all sin. After relating the miracles of Muhammad's birth and infancy, the narrative moves by ellipsis in one verse to his prophetic calling at age forty and his wife Khadija's testament of his prophethood. Where Knappert's annotated translation ends, the work would no doubt go on to focus on the crowning mystical experience of Muhammad's life, the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* or Night Journey.

While the *Hamziyya*'s existence raises many of the same questions as the Kanembu *tafsīr* notes, its importance in establishing traditions of mystical theology and popular devotion is clear and unquestionable. While the elliptical references to events and untranslated phrases in Arabic could be evidence that only an educated elite could

¹⁴ Knappert, "The Hamziyya," verses 13 and 14 (61-62): *Dhātu 'l-'ulumi zilawazo kwa 'Ālimi 'l-Ghaybi ndako ni masimu ya Adama, T'umwa khulasile masitoni ya kuwoneka* ("The Essence of all knowledge which emanates from the Knower of the Unseen is yours; it is the names of Adam O Prophet, you never ceased to exist in the concealment of being"). It is important to note that "Essence of knowledge" and "Knower of the Unseen" both remain untranslated from Arabic. Key terms of Islamic theology and epistemology such as these continue to be known and used by non-Arabic speakers in the current discourse of the Murīdiyya in Senegal, for example.

understand the work, it could equally be evidence of the opposite: that these stories, as well as the Arabic terms, were passing into local popular discourse, creating a motivation to tell them and celebrate them in a local literary form. The literary context of Būṣīrī's original *Hamziyya* (as well as the *Burda* and other poetic eulogies), written to be recited in public during festivals, ceremonies and religious occasions (like Thursdays following *maghrib* prayers) suggests a similar context of public reciting for the Swahili version. Furthermore, the notion of popular devotion does not imply "low religion" and should not be thought of as opposed to a more legalistic or rationalistic elite tradition. Belief in the Unseen and the miracles of Prophets are two of the most basic and requisite elements of Islamic creed, attested in *Sūrat al-Baqara* of the Quran. The miracles listed in the *Hamziyya* are all found in the volumes of al-Ṭabarī's history dealing with the life of the Prophet; and the Unseen, the possibilities and methods of gaining knowledge from within the Unseen, the granting of miracles, and the details and implications of the Night Journey are all central elements of orthodox Islamic ontology and teleology. It is only perhaps an imbalanced focus on these sorts of elements, without due focus on legal and moral issues, that may be considered vulgar and misguided to conservative scholars.

Two other old and famous written works of Swahili poetry, the *Inkishafi* and the *Mashairi ya Liongo*, demonstrate the interplay between the Classical Arabic (and Persian) literary and cultural traditions and local traditions. Both works were composed by the same author, Sayyid 'Abdallah b. 'Alī b. Nāṣir (c. 1720-1820 CE), and unlike the *Hamziyya*, both are original compositions that take local history as their subject matter. The *Inkishafi* (Soul's Awakening), a lament on the fall of the Pate Sultanate, is a classic

homiletic encouraging pious reflection and turning away from worldly pleasures (“mortal defection” in the translator Hichens’s words). In the poem’s quatrains we can see many images found in Classical Arabic literature, like the metaphor of the poem as a string of pearls, or the images of cool rooms perfumed with sandalwood and rosewater, with musk-scented women and cushions of green silk. The poem also includes familiar themes from Classical Arabic homiletic literature, like the image of the world as a seductive but treacherous woman, rhetorical references to the wealth of Solomon and other great potentates as reminders that no worldly gains can be of any avail after the inevitability of death, and details of the torments of the grave. Alongside metaphors of the desert offering cruel mirages to the thirsty and blowing out lamps with its cold winds, however, we also see the briefness and frailty of life and the transitory nature of worldly pleasures portrayed according to the local geography: “‘Tis a surging sea, this mortal vale, of found’ring reef and shoal of ragged shell” and “Behold ye how the roaring fire doth haste through the dry thickets of the barren waste.”¹⁵ In terms of its form, Hichens states that the eleven-syllable meter of the *Inkishafī* does not come from the standard meters of Classical Arabic poetry.¹⁶

Sayyid ‘Abdallah’s *Mashairi ya Liongo* (Songs of Liongo) is another interesting *mélange* in form and content. Its subject is Liongo Fumo, a legendary Swahili warrior said to be descended from Persian nobles sent to the Lamu coast by Caliph Hārūn al-

¹⁵ Abdallah ibn ‘Alī ibn Nāṣir, *al-Inkishafī. The soul’s awakening*, trans. William Hichens (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1972), 57, 65.

¹⁶ Abdallah ibn ‘Alī ibn Nāṣir, *al-Inkishafī*, 33.

Rashīd,¹⁷ who is the subject of an epic cycle of stories within the oral tradition. In the poem, the author takes couplets from a song Liongo is said to have recited while chained and awaiting execution before the king, and applies them to a *takhmīs*, a form of Classical Arabic poetry in which another work is honored and embellished by having each couplet preceded by three new lines in order to form quintains. While Liongo is a Muslim, his couplets are not explicitly religious in character, and focus on expressing his warrior code of honor, love of battle, fearlessness before death and commitment to make war against evil. Sayyid ‘Abdallah’s additions in turn focus mostly on Liongo’s valiance and strength against his enemies: “If I see war, though I am sick, I find health/ I rejoice as a bridegroom when he goes to his bride/ I fix my heart before God without turning/ *I am a young lion who loves the acceptance of death,/ For fear of disgrace and of the enemies seeing me backward.*”¹⁸ Occasionally, however, the additional verses provide some Islamic embellishments, allowing Liongo to quote the Quran and swear an oath on the Gospels and Psalms (*Anjili na Zaburi*).¹⁹ The poem demonstrates an early case of Ajami literature that, although it did spring from a local Islamic discourse and worldview, was not “purely” religious, homiletic or pedantic in its content and took local history as its subject.

4. The Eighteenth Century, Islamic Reform and Ajami in Pular

¹⁷ Alice Werner, “The Swahili Saga of Liongo Fumo,” *Bulletin of the School for Oriental Studies* 4,2 (1926), 248.

¹⁸ Edward Steere, *Swahili Tales* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1869), 457.

¹⁹ Steere, *Swahili Tales*, 457, 461.

The end of the 18th and opening of the 19th centuries CE saw a burgeoning of two schools of Ajami literature, one in Pular (Fulfulde) in the Fuuta Jalon, the other in Hausa and Fulfulde in the Sokoto Caliphate. These literatures were both themselves results of two separate political and social movements for the spread and reform of Islam, part of a group of movements sometimes collectively called the Fulbe Jihads.²⁰ Since the aim of these reformist movements was to foster the popularization and growth of Islamic learning and the adoption of certain beliefs and practices (and the abandonment of others), their intellectuals were motivated to create learning materials that were proselytizing, homiletic, pedantic, and suited to their learners – i.e., focused on basic elements of creed and practice, appealing, easy to memorize and recite, and most importantly, composed in their own languages. As Arabophone scholars, these authors drew considerably on the Classical Arabic literary tradition in form and content, writing sermons, litanies and lessons in an oral style, whose contents matched largely with the genres of the Arabic texts they had studied for their own educations.

The Fuuta Jalon Pular Ajami tradition is said to begin with Cerno Samba Mambeyaa (1755-1852), a scholar from a well-known Muslim family of the Jalo lineage in the Labé

²⁰ Movements such as the creation of the Almamate of Fuuta Jalon in 1727, the Almamate of Fuuta Tooro in the 1770s, the jihad of Usuman 'Dan Fodio in Hausaland, and the movement of al-Hajj 'Umar Taal were all in part related to the growth of Islamic schools and the spread of Islamic reformist ideas in Mauritania, Senegambia and the upper Guinea coast from the late 16th century onwards, as well as interethnic and inter-religious relations in the region. See for instance Mervyn Hiskett, "An Islamic Tradition of Reform in the Western Sudan from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 25 (1962), 577-596; Philip D. Curtin, "Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Interrelations in Mauritania and Senegal," *Journal of African History* 11 (1971), 11-24; David Robinson, "Abdul Qadir and Shaykh Umar: A Continuing Tradition of Islamic Leadership in Futa Toro," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 6 (1973), 286-303; David Robinson, "The Islamic Revolution of Futa Toro," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8 (1975), 185-221; John Ralph Willis, "The Torodbe Clerisy: A Social View," *Journal of African History* 19 (1978), 195-212; and David Robinson, "The Umarian Emigration of the Late Nineteenth Century," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 20 (1987), 245-270.

region. While Mambeyaa wrote numerous poems in Pular and Arabic, he remains most well-known for the most pedantic and pragmatic of them, “The Vein of Eternal Happiness” (Pular *Oogirde Malal*, Arabic *Ma ‘din al-sa ‘ādati*), a 575-line work on basic issues of *fiqh*.²¹ The greater part of the poem explains the requirements for practices and events in the life of the average believer, detailing the legal issues surrounding testament of faith (*shahāda*), ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), payment of *zakāt*, sacrificing an animal for a festival or ceremony, dowry, marriage, and divorce. The poem also deals briefly with spiritual retreat (*khalwa*), magic (where Mambeyaa warns against both the use of un-Islamic spells as well as defrauding people through magical charlatanism), and divine apportionment or fortune (Pular *arshike*, Arabic *arzāq*), and offers a lengthy exhortation to repentance before the conclusion. Even this legal primer must include some of the homiletic discourse (Arabic *wa ‘z*) which is such a hallmark of the literature and worldview of Islamic practitioners whether reformist or apologist.²²

Right in the opening to the *Oogirde Malal*, as Sow notes, Mambeyaa explains clearly and defends his decision to compose the work in Pular Ajami: “I will cite the Authentic

²¹ Alfa Ibrahim Sow, *Le FILON du bonheur éternel*, Classiques Africains 10 (Paris: A. Colin, 1971). Mambeyaa belonged to the Mālikī school, as have the vast majority of Muslims in West Africa, both historically and demographically. He often makes reference to the *Mukhtaṣar* of Ibn Khalil, an abridgement of Mālikī *fiqh* which is generally the standard *fiqh* text for learners throughout the region. In verse 3 of the *Oogirde Malal* he also names himself as an ‘Asharī, a member of the school of speculative theology which accepted the use of rational arguments in establishing the ineffability of divine will or destiny (*qadr*), divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) and certain verses of the Quran as beyond rational human comprehension. Cornell (*Realm of the Saint*, Chapters 2 and 3) argued that the spread of ‘Asharism in the Maghrib was the result of local scholars of the 12th and 13th c. CE (such as Abū Imrān al-Fāsī), who desired to bring the region into the fold of an emerging Sunni internationalism which they had discovered through their travels to and correspondence with centers of learning in the Near East.

²² Sow, *Le FILON du bonheur*, 121, verses 497-501: “The friend is incapable of raising your fortune, the enemy incapable of diminishing it, that’s sure/ You proceed not an instant and survive not the blink of an eye, all counts made/ Who brings you into being, life and death is none other, Who eases your suffering and flourishes your possessions/ Who will give you happiness or damnation tomorrow is none other, than the One, qualified by the Attributes of Perfection/ The Eternal, the Powerful, the Inescapable, the Infinite! The sublime is His in this world and the next.”

texts (the *Ṣaḥīḥ*) in the Pular language, to aid your understanding. On hearing them, accept them. For each person, truly, only his or her language allows them to grasp what the Authentics say. Many Fulbe do not penetrate what they have been taught in Arabic and remain in uncertainty.”²³ Later on he again affirms the importance of teaching in the local language: “Whether in Arabic, Pular, or in other languages, anything is valuable/ which helps [the believer] in exact knowledge of [the requirements of the *shahāda*] so that the complete sense of the Law is known.”²⁴ In fact, as Sow relates, these defenses were necessary, as Mambeyaa encountered resistance from other intellectuals. local tradition remembers that al-Hajj ‘Umar Taal rebuked Mambeyaa, saying that if he continued to write in Pular, Arabic would soon be forgotten in the land.²⁵ Sow argues that the historical significance of the poem as one of the first written works of Pular Ajami is further attested by two manuscripts which do not use modified Arabic letters to transcribe Pular phonemes not found in Arabic, instead using only standard Arabic letters and conflating as many as five phonemes in one character.²⁶

Sow’s anthology of Pular Ajami literature from Fuuta Jalon complements the *fiqh*-oriented *Oogirde Malal* with other works that recall the genres and themes of Arabic literature of West Africa. Cerno Samba Mambeyaa’s two poems featured in the anthology center on praise of and devotion to Prophet Muhammad. The first, “Let Us Pray For Muhammad,” is an emotive prayer litany in which every line ends with the Prophet’s name. Rather than narrating any biographical episodes, the poem exalts

²³ Sow, *Le FILON du bonheur*, 43, verses 4-6.

²⁴ Ibid., 61, verses 113-114.

²⁵ Ibid., 17.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

Muhammad's position as the pinnacle of creation and greatest intercessor on the Day of Judgment, celebrating and invoking the blessing that comes with remembering and praying for him. The very opening lines also include the same elements of mystical theology found in the *Hamziyya*, in an order and wording that appear to be taken from a similar source: "The child of Sa'īdu, Samba Muhammadu, the Seelenké, speaks on the prayer for Muhammad, to whom were taught the secrets of all the sciences, which serve to sing and pray for Muhammad, who has been elected since the fruit of Adam, he who was created before creation is Muhammad."²⁷ Sambeyaa's second work, "Pilgrimage to the Tomb of the Messenger," uses another important religious theme (pilgrimage) to express devotion and intimacy with the Prophet.²⁸

Many other works in Sow's anthology show a similar desire to motivate religious fervor in the community, exploring themes including devotion to the Prophet, pilgrimage to holy places, exhortations to pursue Islamic studies and read the Quran, the fleeting nature of this earthly life, the punishments of the grave and fear of the Day of Judgment, the pleasures of Paradise and terrors of Hell. Social commentary and criticism naturally forms another important element of this proselytizing literature, and many poems decry the morals of the age, satirizing ignorant believers, hypocritical scholars, corrupt leaders, and women who defy the social order. These "alarm cries from a minority of enlightened

²⁷ Sow, *La femme la vache la foi: écrivains et poètes du Fouta-Djalon*, Classiques Africains 5 (Paris: Julliard, 1966), 45.

²⁸ Sow, *La femme la vache la foi*, 52-55. The author imagines himself welcomed within the personal company of him whom "all the moons together, all the suns together reflect the light of his face," and begs for his intercession before God, whereupon Muhammad goes to ask God directly, finds the request accepted, and returns promising to pray for him.

reformers” or “intellectual aristocracy”, as Sow describes them,²⁹ can help us to envision the tensions and changes affecting the social landscape during the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and grasp at the realities of local discourses, beliefs and practices. Bernard Salvaing examined poems from Sow’s anthology and other poems dealing with life under colonial rule in order to analyze attitudes and coping strategies that emerged among the Islamic scholarly elite and other segments of the population.³⁰

Once again, however, questions must be raised regarding how much the existence of these texts represents the spread of local Islamic discourses among the population, or more simply, how meaningful these texts were to how many people. Sow’s analysis offers mixed conclusions. On the one hand, he describes the intentions of the authors to capture the attentions and emotions of the illiterate masses, employing evocative sensory descriptions and exaggerated appeals; he also raises the simple and repetitive structures and short lengths of what would ultimately remain an oral poetry, “destined to be sung and learned by heart,” recited in public, not read silently and alone.³¹ On the other hand, he describes a divide between the “intellectual aristocracy” and the peasant and herder masses of a “semi-feudal” system, one which is not completely bridged even by the spread of popular literacy and basic education that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He describes the writings of the *litterati* as “cold” to the ears of the

²⁹ Ibid., 18.

³⁰ Bernard Salvaing, “Colonial Rule and Fulfulde Literature in Futa Jalon (Guinea),” *Sudanic Africa* 15 (2004), 111-132.

³¹ Sow, *La femme la vache la foi*, 16-17.

masses, “enameled in references and Quranic citations.”³² Salvaing also displays some skepticism about how widespread the emotions and attitudes found in the texts he analyzed were.

Yet, although proselytizing and homiletic poems comprise the majority of texts collected for Sow’s anthology, they are not the only category of written literature to be found in Pular Ajami. Local history and genealogy, important genres in the Arabic manuscript tradition, are also represented by three texts in Sow’s anthology, including an internal account of the Almamis of Fuuta Jalon which includes many details regarding their various branches as well as relations with other groups in the region.³³ Sow also makes mention of Ajami texts dealing with astronomy and chronology, translations of Arabic prose works, and original essay compositions, although he concludes that such works are rare because their potential readership is too small. Perhaps the most intriguing of these non-homiletic writings are those which show local expansion into new domains of literacy with themes and forms not found in the Arabo-Islamic literary spectrum. Of these, some can be seen as an offshoot of the religious literary tradition in that they continue to be written by elite Arabophone scholars. The modern poet Cerno Abdurahmaan Baa, for example, has written meditations on the past, present and future of Guinea, which include both poignant reflections on the tumultuous changes of recent history as well as patriotic celebrations of the modern nation’s abundant natural wealth and virtuous people, and reflections on whether today’s children should study in French

³² Ibid., 19.

³³ For example, the text relates a tradition that the ancestors of the Almamis, originating in Fez, came to visit al-Hajj Salīm Suware, founder of the Jakhanke community of Jakha, and the latter advised them to come settle in the Fuuta Jalon. Sow, *La femme la vache la foi*, 211.

schools or Quranic schools.³⁴ While Baa's writings are not explicitly religious or proselytizing, they are heavily informed by his Islamic education and faith and it would be artificial to call them non-religious or secular.

An entirely different set of writings, although they only comprise a small section of Sow's anthology, are praised in his introductory essay as a very expressive and truly local and original form of literature. This is the popular poetry, committed to writing by the newly literate peasant farmers and herders, coming not from any bookish tradition but instead from their own lives and environments, and dealing mainly with the two subjects in their lives most worthy of poetic dedications: their women and their herds. Next to so many solemn sermons of warning and *memento mori*, the wicked humor used to praise Faatu Seydi, a wife of the Almami 'Umar famous for her beauty, comes as a welcome bit of levity: "The *Tuhfa*, the *Maqāma* and the *Risāla*,³⁵ all three in unison praise sister Faatu, eyes circled with kohl, blued gums, lips like the fine embroideries of Jongaasi, That's sister Faatu!"³⁶ The popular poetry about cows includes not only praises of their virtues, but also verbal formulas of incantation featuring verses combined with magic words to protect the herd while out grazing in pasture or circling in for the night.³⁷ Unlike the verses of the Arabophone scholars, which regularly write in the Classical Arabic poetic meters and borrow heavily from their imagery, Sow writes that the only rhythmic standard guiding the popular poets is "the pleasure of the listener," and praises their

³⁴ See Salvaing's discussion of Baa's poetry in "Colonial Rule" as well as the works transcribed and translated by Sow in *La femme la vache la foi*.

³⁵ The *Tuhfa al-wardiyya* (theology), *Maqamāt Ḥarīrī* (literary composition) and the *Risāla Ibn Abī Zayd* (Mālikī *fiqh*) are all the standard texts of advanced education in the region for their respective subjects.

³⁶ Sow, *La femme la vache la foi*, 287.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 302-325.

wordcraft and ability to invoke the landscape without over-embellishment.³⁸ These poems demonstrate the acquisition of literacy by non-elites who have empowered themselves as authors, using their literacy not just for functional purposes but to create literary traditions of their own.

Given the extensive Pular Ajami tradition of Fuuta Jalon and the Fulfulde Ajami tradition of Hausaland, one may expect a similarly widespread tradition among the Halpulaar of Fuuta Tooro, the historical cradle of both Fulbe populations. Known Ajami writings in Pulaar from Tooro and the rest of the Senegal River valley are relatively rare, however. Some historians have attributed this to geographic proximity and historical relations with the Moors, which, coupled with the conservatism of the Tooroŋe Muslim tradition, has created an educational and scholarly tradition more focused on the mastery of Arabic.³⁹ Despite this tendency, a small but important number of manuscripts have surfaced which are connected with the mid-nineteenth century jihad movement of al-Hajj ‘Umar Taal. The most famous of these, an official verse biography by one of Taal’s followers and scribes, Muhammadu Aliyu Caam, appears to contravene Taal’s edict to Cerno Samba Mambeyaa against the use of Ajami as remembered in Fuuta Jalon tradition.⁴⁰ Similar to the biographic works on Usuman Dan Fodio, this work outlines al-Hajj ‘Umar’s campaign as well as elaborating his miracles and saintly qualities. Another Pulaar Ajami poem, written by a foot soldier in Taal’s army, provides a much less glorious account of the campaigns with a view from the ground. Attributed to Lamin

³⁸ Ibid., 16, 19.

³⁹ David Robinson, “Fulfulde Literature in Arabic Script,” *History in Africa* 9 (1982), 252.

⁴⁰ Mouhamadou Aliou Tyam, *La Vie d’El Hadj Omar, qacida en Poular, transcription, traduction, notes et glossaire par Henri Gaden* (Paris: Institut de l’Ethnologie, 1935).

Maabo Gise, of a family of weavers from the same area as Caam, the poem describes the extreme privation and hardship experienced during the campaign, from running out of food and eating leaves to running out of munitions and using beans and rocks in place of bullets. The author vividly depicts the carnage of the battlefield, the pain of lost friends, war fatigue and nostalgia for home; it also alludes to the greed for booty among fighters, narrating instances where his companions sought excuses to pillage and quarreled with each other over spoils.⁴¹ This text demonstrates the possibilities of Ajami literature to provide us with historical perspectives and primary sources that have hitherto been unreached and unreachable in scholarly research.

5. Hausa Ajami Traditions and the Sokoto Caliphate

Nigerian scholar Ibrahim Yaro Yahaya, in his history of Hausa written literature, attested that Hausa Ajami poetry was composed by three famous scholars of the seventeenth century, Abdullahi Suka of Kano and Dan Marina and Dan Masani of Katsina, who are said to have written some Ajami poems in addition to their works in Arabic. Unfortunately, the only Ajami works cited as still extant are Suka's "Riwayar Annabi Musa" (Narration of the Life of the Prophet Moses) in written manuscript and Dan Masani's "Wakar Yaƙin Badar" (Song of the Battle of Badr) in the oral tradition.⁴² Yahaya and Philips argue that many other old manuscripts may still exist among the unattributed poetry of state and national archives, as well as in private libraries. But from

⁴¹ Moustapha Kane, Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo and David Robinson, "Une vision iconoclaste de la guerre sainte d'al-Hājj Umar Taal," *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 133-135, XXXIV 1-3 (1994), 385-417.

⁴² Yahaya, *Hausa a Rubuce: Tarihin Rubuce Rubuce Cikin Hausa* (Zaria, 1988), cited in John Edward Philips, *Spurious Arabic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin African Studies Program, 2000), 19-20.

the poem titles above, we can assume that most works followed the pattern seen in Swahili literature, adapting works and stories from the Classical Arabic canon to entertain the listening public.

The revivalist movement surrounding Usman Dan Fodio (1754-1817, popularly known as Shehu), founder of the Sokoto Caliphate, contributed significantly to the flourishing of Hausa Ajami literature. Born to a Fulbe Muslim family which had migrated east to Hausaland from the Fuuta Tooro several centuries earlier,⁴³ Dan Fodio was a scholar of considerable intellectual weight who wrote prolifically in Arabic, as well as an ascetic who sought to live a life of exemplary piety and a member of the Qādiriyya Sufi order. Some of his treatises regarding political leadership and legal administration in non-Muslim lands continue to be studied as master texts throughout the Islamic world. His reputation for knowledge and piety attracted Muslims from around the area to come study under him, with notables including the Sarkin Gobir,⁴⁴ pledging themselves as his disciples. Dissatisfied with what he viewed as the persistence of un-Islamic practices among the nobles as well as the general population, ignorance of major points of belief and practice and the unwillingness of scholars to spread education or preach for reform, and the unjust persecution and oppression of common Muslims, Dan Fodio petitioned the Sarki and gained the right to make his hometown of Degel, on the outskirts of Gobir, a community where believers would be free to study and practice in peace. Dan Fodio's complaints against his society are detailed in his early works such as the *Iḥyā al-sunna*

⁴³ As his name, Dan Fodio (Hausa for “son of Fuuta”), suggests. Historical records indicate that Fulbe emigration from Fuuta Tooro and Fuuta Jalon toward the Middle Niger and Hausaland began in the fifteenth century: Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (London: Longman, 1984), 53.

⁴⁴ King of Gobir, the city-state in which Dan Fodio lived.

wa Ikḥmād al-bidaʿ (Revival of the *sunna* and Extinguishing of Innovation)⁴⁵ and later post-jihad works outlining his social vision such as the *Bayān wujūb al-hijra ʿala ʾl-ʿibad* (Treatise on the Obligation of Emigration Upon Believers)⁴⁶ and the *Sirāj al-ikhwān* (The Lamp of the Brotherhood).⁴⁷ Dan Fodio preached and taught peacefully in Degel for years, presiding over an ever-growing community. In 1794,⁴⁸ he had a vision of the Qādiriyya's founding saint, ʿAbd al-Qādir Jīlānī, who invested him with the "Sword of Truth" (*Sayf al-ḥaqq*), and thereafter his preaching became more militant, drawing a growing number of disciples from among escaped slaves and instructing his followers to carry weapons to defend themselves.⁴⁹ With the Shehu becoming an increasing threat to the Sarki's authority (as well as other elites), in 1802 he revoked Degel's legal autonomy and forbade the Shehu to accept any new members to the community. Dan Fodio then moved his community westward out of the Sarki's reach, a move which he fashioned as a *hijra*, and in the next two years, he amassed more followers and weapons, officially declaring the *hijra* (tantamount to launching the jihad) on 12 Dhū'l-Qi'dah 1218 (21 Feb., 1804).⁵⁰ The jihad's success destroyed the previous Muslim states in the region and

⁴⁵ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Uṯmān b. Fūdī" (by D.M. Last), http://www.brillonline.nl.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-7775 (accessed January 8, 2012).

⁴⁶ F. H. El Masri, ed. tr. (Khartoum and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁴⁷ Muhammad Shareef, tr. (Pittsburgh: Sankore Institute, 1992).

⁴⁸ At age 40, the same age in which Prophet Muhammad began to receive the Quranic revelation.

⁴⁹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Uṯmān b. Fūdī" (accessed January 8, 2012).

⁵⁰ The date is given in Asmā'u's Fulfulde verse chronicle of the campaign, "Filitago" (The Journey), in Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u, Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 137. Dhū'l-Qi'dah is one of the four sacred months in which fighting is prohibited by the Quran. It is also the month in which Muhammad's followers swore the *Bay'at al-Riḍwān* (Oath of Good Pleasure) under an acacia tree. The oath, which is referred to in Quran 48:18, became a defining moment in establishing Muhammad's leadership and an important statement of loyalty for all believers.

established the Sokoto Caliphate, ruled by a new aristocracy that was almost entirely of Fulbe ethnicity.

Usman 'Dan Fodio's program for social change was communicated to the common people through his preaching in Hausa and Fulfulde,⁵¹ and then through Hausa and Fulfulde Ajami poetry, written by himself, members of his family, and other disciples who were close to him. As many as 25 Hausa poems are attributed to the Shehu, including twelve original Hausa compositions and thirteen translations of his Arabic works.⁵² The largest contribution to Hausa Ajami literature was made by the Shehu's daughter, Asmā'u (1793-1864, popularly known as Nana Asmā'u), who was eleven when the jihad began and wrote as many as 22 poems in Hausa, all composed during the Caliphal rule of her brother Muhammad Bello (1781-1837, succeeded his father in 1817 and ruled until his death) or after.⁵³ Other works in Fulfulde and Hausa were also composed by Usman's brother, Abdullahi 'Dan Fodio, and his son, Isa 'Dan Shehu, as well as other scholarly contemporaries in the area, including Muhammadu Tukur, Muhammadu Na Birnin Gwari (b. 1758) and Malam Shi'itu 'Dan Abdurraufu (1756-1834) who is said to have brought the Tijaniyya Sufi order to Zaria.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid. There is also a reference to "Bula Muhammad Mode, who translated the Shehu's sermons into Hausa," in Asmā'u's Fulfulde poem, *Ko'iwī i' Shehu* (The Story of the Shehu), verse 69 (Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 173).

⁵² Bello Sa'id, cited in Philips, *Spurious Arabic*, 24.

⁵³ There are three different counts for the Hausa Ajami poems attributed to Nana Asmā'u. Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack's *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u* includes fifteen Hausa poems (transliterated in Roman script in Appendix A, 424-501) from a total of 61 works. Bello Sa'id's thesis, cited in Philips, *Spurious Arabic*, 24, attributes seventeen Hausa poems to Asmā'u; Mukoshy's thesis, also cited in Philips (Ibid.), attributes 22 Hausa poems to Asmā'u. Boyd and Mack only accepted works that were verified by Waziri Junaidu, great-grandson of Asmā'u and her official heir while they were doing their research.

⁵⁴ Philips, *Spurious Arabic*, 24.

Mervyn Hiskett, in his *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*, offered a typology of the genres and themes of Hausa Ajami poetry that matches very closely both with the genres of the Arabic literary tradition in West Africa as well as what we know of Ajami literary traditions of East and West Africa. He elaborates the following categories: homiletic or admonitory poems (Hausa *wa'azī*, from Arabic *wa'z*, admonition, sermon), dealing with themes of asceticism, contempt for the material world, death and the Day of Judgment; didactic verses instructing on issues of *fiqh* (Hausa *fikihi*) and theology (Hausa *tauhīdī*, Arabic *tawhīd*); panegyric (Hausa *madahu*, Arabic *madīh*) of the Prophet and his biography (*sīra*), also extended to praise poems and biographical poems for other prophets and more notably, saints; poems of astrological and numerological verses (Hausa *ilmin nujumi*, from Arabic *ilm al-nujūm*, science of stars) dealing with the stars, timekeeping, and augury; and versified histories and chronologies (Hausa *tārīhī*, Arabic *tārīkh*).⁵⁵ Although Hiskett classified Hausa Ajami literature as essentially religious in content, contrasting it to a secular traditional oral literature, the genres of historical and astrological literatures, which can address worldly issues from a religious perspective, demonstrate some of the difficulties in attempting to draw a division between the religious and the secular. Hiskett's research also led him to other texts that defied this division, like the satire of a famous mid-nineteenth century ascetic which employed

⁵⁵ Mervyn Hiskett, *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1975), Chapter 3 and onward.

references from the Quran, Islamic popular legends of the prophets, and pre-Islamic Arabic literature to upbraid one of his wives.⁵⁶

Hiskett argues that *wa'azī*, homiletic or admonitory verse, by far the most common genre of Ajami poetry, began by drawing almost all of its content from the descriptions, allusions and rhetoric of the Arabic eschatological poetry and prose that was popular in the region. He specifically cites the parts of the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (the most common *tafsīr* in West Africa) and the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (the most established collection of *ḥadīth* in the Sunni Muslim world) dealing with the punishments of the grave and the Day of Judgment, as well as special compilations of eschatological *ḥadīth*,⁵⁷ a “Book of Asceticism” (*Kitāb al-zuhd*) by twelfth-century North African poet ‘Alī b. Ḥusayn, and the *‘Ashriyyāt* or “Ten Odes” of Moroccan poet al-Fāzāzī. Many of the admonitions and descriptions of the punishments of Hell in these Islamic eschatological works are so similar to Medieval Christian eschatology and homiletics that Hiskett draws parallels to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and other Medieval European poetry, and refers to common themes by their Latin names from Medieval sermons: *memento mori*, *sic transit gloria mundi*, *ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?*, etc. Among the imagery borrowed from the Classical Arabic tradition, some of the early works do make use of imagery from the local landscape, as seen in the lines from the *Bakin Marī* (Black Leg-Irons) of Muhammad Tukur, a contemporary of the Shehu from Zamfara:

“In the place of eating *tūwō* where they played and laughed,

⁵⁶ Hiskett, “Mamman Konni: An Eccentric Poet and Holy Man from Bodīnga,” *African Language Studies*, 11 (1970), 211-227.

⁵⁷ The *Tanbīh* of ninth-century CE Naṣr al-Dīn Samarqandī, and the *Daqā’iq al-akhbār* of the eleventh-century ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Qāḍī (Hiskett, *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*, 28).

There is no footprint, nay, no man, but only the hoof mark of the hartebeest.
 The weaver of fine black and white cloth and the weaver of open-work cloth too,
 Are today no more, only the spider who weaves to give the monkey.
 Their drummers and their trumpeters have passed on,
 The jackal and the cricket have inherited the place where [once] the *zarī* jingled.”⁵⁸

As time went on, Hiskett argues, writers of homiletic (*wa’azī*) and ascetic (*zuhūdī*) poetry began to take more literary freedoms and compose works with more of a local stamp. They did continue, however, to write strictly in Classical Arabic poetic meters. One of the favorite forms of imagery developed by Hausa poets during the nineteenth century was the metaphor, seen in the *Inkishafī*, of the world as an old harlot, hiding its true ugliness with beautiful robes and seductive cosmetics. Aliyu Dan Sidi, Emir of Zaria from 1903 to 1920, wrote a 64-stanza *takhmīs* with this theme, using vivid imagery of the beauty and cunning of women and heedless desire of men he could see around him, and finished with the following warning:

This world, thus it is she draws
 Some men, let us not be careless,
 May God save us from you,
 ... There is discomfort in any other place than God’s,
 For there you will find no security,
 If you intend to enter [God’s place],
 Stop up the door of any other place,
 For [in it] you will not find fulfillment of your need.⁵⁹

Hiskett argues that the language of later works appealed to listening audiences by using subtle yet colorful allegories from local life, as well as clever wordplay that made use of

⁵⁸ Hiskett, *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*, 35. *Tūwō* is pounded millet paste, and the *zarī* is a percussive instrument made of a large metal ring with smaller rings attached.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

alliteration and minimal differences in consonant, vowel or tone, both prominent elements of traditional oral praise poetry or *maroka*.⁶⁰

Just as the *Oogirde Malal* has been one of the most popular and widespread works of the Fuuta Jalon Pular Ajami tradition, Hiskett writes that didactic versifications on *fiqh* are the second most common genre of Hausa Ajami works after *wa'azī*.⁶¹ Also like the *Oogirde Malal*, the majority of these are devoted to a detailed understanding of the *farā'id* (Ha *farillōli*), the legal obligations of Islamic practice such as prayer, zakāt, etc. Hiskett ties the Hausa versifications to two common Arabic versifications on elements of *farā'id* or *'ibādāt* (rites of worship), the *Manzūmāt al-Qurṭubī* and the *Muqaddima Ibn Rushd*. Less common than the poems about *farā'id* are more advanced works dealing with the divine attributes and other creedal elements of theology. These Hiskett has linked to the *Jawharat al-tawḥīd* of Laqānī (d.1668) and the *Umm al-barāhīn* and *al-Murshida* of the famous scholar and mystic from Tlemcen, al-Sanūsī (1435/6-1490).⁶²

After *wa'azī* and *zuhudī* poetry and the didactic versifications of *fikihi* and *tauhīdī*, poems praising the Prophet Muhammad and other holy figures form the third major category of Hausa Ajami literature. While the category holds several genres, including panegyric (Ha *madahu*, Ar. *madīḥ*), eulogy and prophetic biography (*sīra*) or hagiography, all of them have many elements in common. While the Arabic *sīra* prose literature comprises detailed genealogical and chronological records, in popular poetry the biographies have tended to focus on the extraordinary feats from within that literature

⁶⁰ Ibid., 86-87.

⁶¹ Ibid., 71.

⁶² The *Umm al-barāhīn* is an important elementary text of creed (*'aqīda*) throughout the Western Sahel; it was versified by Aḥmadu Bamba early in his career, and the resulting text is still a basic element in the curriculum of the Murīdiyya (see Chapter 3).

(and popular tradition) that demonstrate divine favor and mystical elevation, just as was seen in the *Hamziyya*.⁶³ Hiskett draws our attention to several prominent Arabic sources for the genre, including Būṣīrī's *Burda*, Qāḍī 'Iyād's *al-Shifā*, the *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* of the fifteenth-century al-Juzūlī, Fāzāzī's *Ishtirīyyāt*, and others.⁶⁴ The miracles surrounding Muhammad's birth and infancy, the host of angels fighting alongside the Muslims at the battle of Badr, and especially the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* figure largely in this literature. One difference between *madahu* and *sīra* seems to be the former's strict adherence to the forms of the Arabic sources, which often make oblique, allusive references to episodes from the Prophet's life that only those already familiar with the story would be able to understand. For *sīra* poems on the other hand, Hiskett gives several examples from the poet Asim Degel's "Song of Muhammad" in which the imagery is adapted to local culture.⁶⁵ The "Song of Muhammad" is one of two works cited (the other by Usuman 'Dan Fodio's daughter Asmā'u) that, like Cerno Mambeyaa's "Let Us Pray For Muhammad," uses the names Muhammad or Ahmad at the end of every line, forming an invocation that the audience can repeat. It has also been recited every Friday before congregational prayers in Kano, and during other festive occasions, and so has reinforced the presence of local Islamic discourse in the culture, for generations.⁶⁶

The case of Hausa Ajami literature gives our first chance to examine a central part of Islamic belief and practice in West Africa, the role of the saint, with the "Song of the

⁶³ Hiskett, *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*, 51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁵ For example, Hiskett writes that Muhammad's journey to heaven is described in terms that recall the court of a Hausa Sarki (*Ibid.*, 59).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

Shehu's Miracles" (*Wakar Karamomin Shehu*), written by his son Isa Dan Shehu.⁶⁷ The poem, which is in turn based on the Arabic *Rawḍ al-jinān* of Gidado Dan Laima (a close companion of the Shehu, Muhammad Bello's vizier and Asmā'u's husband), provides a clear example of sainthood expressed in local discourse in a form that would be felt and understood at both the elite and common levels. It is a narrative of how divine *baraka*, both realized through and proven by the granting of miracles, combines with advanced asceticism and spiritual knowledge in order to create spiritual (and in this case political) leadership and benefactive grace for the community. In these verses we hear of the Shehu traveling great distances with supernatural speed, reading and influencing people's thoughts, taming animals, summoning jinn, preaching to them and controlling them, and mystically intervening to protect his followers when they are in trouble. His connection to other holy people is affirmed by visits by an unnamed *walī* from Baghdad, representatives of Sidi Mukhtār al-Kuntī of Timbuktu, and finally 'Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī and Prophet Muhammad himself, who both confirm for him his mission of continuing their mission for the people of his place and time: he is the *mujaddid*, the renewer or reviver who will be sent to protect the faith and strengthen the believers in every age.⁶⁸

Parallel to these miracles and declarations of *baraka* in establishing the Shehu's status are the declarations of his outward behavior, his compassion, generosity and disdain for the world. When the Sarkin Gobir tries to win his favor with a gift of a thousand cowries

⁶⁷ Mervyn Hiskett, "The 'song of the Shaihu's Miracles': a Hausa hagiography from Sokoto," *African Language Studies* 12 (1971), 71-107.

⁶⁸ The *ḥadīth* of the *mujaddid* is translated in Hiskett, "The 'song of the Shaihu's Miracles,'" 105. Similar to this poem's references to the Shehu's connections with other Islamic communities in the region is a reference in Asmā'u's "The Story of the Shehu" to "the scholar from Jenne who know divine mysteries" within the Shehu's circle (Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 171).

and a robe, he refuses, and asks instead for “five robes”: the ability to preach to all, the release and pardon of all Muslim prisoners, respect for every common Muslim and their relief from oppression.⁶⁹ On several occasions during the jihad, the Shehu refuses his share of war booty or gifts, asking that it be divided among others. His resolute absence of worldliness is expressed as an important element in his political leadership:

“Our Shaihu summoned all the Muslims,
He said, a leader should be appointed in this community.
Then a body of Muslims met,
Him they elected, allegiance was made to him,
Everyone wanted him, there is no doubt, the people
Agreed upon him everyone loved him.
The allegiance which the community made, in truth it was strong,
For he did not desire worldly power, always (he desired) the life of the ascetic.
One pair of trousers only (did he own), together with a cap. He did not
Sleep upon carpets, increase in your love for him.”⁷⁰

Somewhat paradoxically, however, an episode in which the Shehu refuses a gift of thirty slaves, but instead divides them up amongst his followers, demonstrates the importance of slavery in the political economy of the Caliphate and hints at the jihad’s aftermath for the local population.⁷¹

The work of Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd has focused on the role of Ajami poetry produced by scholars of Dan Fodio’s movement in motivating and mobilizing the population under the Sokoto Caliphate toward social change. Specifically they have highlighted the work of the Shehu’s daughter, Nana Asmā’u, who in her capacity as moral exemplar, authority, scholar and educator, used poetry in Fulfulde and Hausa as

⁶⁹ Hiskett, “The ‘song of the Shaihu’s Miracles,’” 91.

⁷⁰ Hiskett, “The ‘song of the Shaihu’s Miracles,’” 97.

⁷¹ Ibid., 99.

important components of a more holistic program intended to exhort, instruct and re-educate the subjects of the Caliphate.⁷² They argue that Asmā'u understood the importance of women as masters of the domestic domain and the upbringing of children, and therefore understood that educating women was essential to the movement's long-term success.

One of the greatest obstacles to the Islamization of Hausa women and the movement in general was the spirit possession cult known as *Bori*, which by Dan Fodio's time had already become established as an important social network and source of cultural capital for women, who were excluded from other social spaces and domains of power. The *Inna*, chief priestess of the *Bori*, was considered the female counterpart of the Sarkin Gobir and consequently one of the most powerful women in the land.⁷³ Mack and Boyd argue that rather than simply suppressing the *Bori*, Asmā'u tried to coopt its energy by providing Islamic alternatives to the benefits it was offering women. To supplant the social network and feeling of belonging and solidarity offered by the *Bori*, Asmā'u created her own network, the *Yan Taru* or Sisterhood, comprised of her own female students, who were then charged with setting examples of conduct and creating networks of solidarity, friendship, instruction, mentorship, prayer and counsel. At the head of the *Yan Taru* were the senior officials, named *jajis* (a Hausa term for a female caravan leader), masters of knowledge and practice who brought more women to Asmā'u for blessing and instruction. Asmā'u ceremonially bestowed the *jajis* with the *malfa*, a

⁷² Boyd & Mack attest that the honorific *Nana* of her name has been used as a title for female scholars in Timbuktu (*Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 14).

⁷³ Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 16-17.

balloon-shaped hat woven of silky grass that was previously worn only by notable men or by the *Inna*, thus reappropriating an important symbol of power from the *Bori*.⁷⁴

Describing the network and its goals, she writes the following in her poem, *Elegy for Hawa'u*, who was a *jaji*:

During the hot season, the rains, harvest, when the harmattan blows, and the beginning of the rains, she was on the road bringing people to me.
 She warned them to journey in good faith, for she said intention was important. As for myself I taught them the religion of God in order to turn them from error and instill in them the knowledge of their obligatory duties.
 Like ritual ablution, prayer, alms, pilgrimage and the fast, all of which are compulsory for adults.
 I taught them what, in the faith of Islam, is permissible and what is forbidden, so they would know how to act.
 I said they must distance themselves from sins such as lying, meanness, hatred and envy
 Adultery, theft and self-esteem. I said they should repent because these things lead to perdition.
 The women students and their children are well known for their good works and peaceful behavior in the community.⁷⁵

In addition, Asmā'u lauded and encouraged the efforts of the *Yan Taru* when she praised their virtues as a group at the end of a poem celebrating the *baraka* and pious good deeds of famous Muslim women from Aisha and Fatima to Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya and others.⁷⁶ This emphasis on the symbolic and historical connections with the "heavenly community" of prophets, saints and pious believers effectively mythologizes the present generation as the successors of the timeless and universal venture of human destiny that is to be found within the spirit of Islam. It is a pattern repeated throughout

⁷⁴ Ibid., and Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asmā'u, Scholar and Scribe* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 89. Interesting parallels can be drawn with the male *futuwwa* youth organizations of Persia and their appropriation of symbology from the royal warriors of the Shah.

⁷⁵ Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 253-254.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 68-82. The poem's title, *Tawassuli Ga Mata Masu Albarka*, translated by Boyd and Mack as "Sufi Women," might also be rendered as "Exposition On the Women of Baraka."

Islamic history, including elsewhere in the movement of the Shehu as well as other West African revivalist movements.

Mack and Boyd further argue that in order to supplant the *Bori*'s therapeutic uses and strategies to negotiate and mitigate the unseen, Asmā'u offered works such as the *Prayer for Rain*, a poem which explains that it is appropriate to ask God for favor with regard to drought (naturally a domain of the *Bori*) as well as other troubles ailing the community, and detailed the reasons why the drumming and dancing of the *Bori* are forbidden by Islam. She also wrote a prose work in Arabic on Prophetic Medicine (*Ṭibb al-Nābī*, a Classical literary genre concerning therapeutic uses of the verses of the Quran) that included cures for difficult childbirth and other common health problems.⁷⁷

The poem *Tabbat Hakika*, "Be Sure of God's Truth," Asmā'u's Hausa adaptation of Bello's *takhmīs* of a Fulfulde work by Usman Dan Fodiyo, explicitly elaborates many of the points of social change intended by the Shehu's movement.⁷⁸ Listeners are warned of the divine punishments attached to injustices regarding property and trade, including highway robbery, stealing by force, cheating, inflating market prices, and coercing people to repay debts when they are unable. Tellingly, many of the warnings regard crimes of property resulting from the jihad itself, such as the unjust seizure of land from conquered people, illegal sexual intercourse,⁷⁹ the enslavement of Muslims, and concealment of war booty or failure to turn over the one-fifth portion (Arabic *khims*) due to the State. Similar

⁷⁷ Mack & Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad*, 102-119.

⁷⁸ Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 44-57.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 52: "When the army is victorious,/ Slaves are taken, including some for the leader./ But some men act illegally/ They fall on the women, disregarding all sanctions./ They will fall in the Fire, Be sure of God's Truth." In general, the women of conquered populations were taken as slaves and concubines and divided between the victors, but there is a sanctioned waiting period of three menstrual cycles before intercourse is permitted.

to these crimes of property are other unjust acts regarding honesty and fairness, such as lying, breaking promises, gossiping, disrupting family harmony, unequal treatment of one's wives, and covering up the wrongdoings of family and friends. There are also many warnings against unjust spiritual or esoteric practices including witchcraft, the casting of evil spells and making of evil charms (especially between spouses or co-wives),⁸⁰ an intriguing warning against spiritual charlatanism ("those who pretend to be saintly in order to get money", verse 43), and a warning against the tradition of paying praise-singers (also present among the Arabs of Muhammad's time).

It is clear from these lists that the movement was intent on establishing the rule of law according to its Islamic terms, and indeed, some of the poem's opening verses exhort loyalty to the Caliph as well as the legal system.⁸¹ Paralleling these are warnings to the leaders against corruption and oppression. Boyd and Mack argue that establishing the political legitimacy of the regime, both in the first years after the jihad and through the significant revolts and intrigues that threatened the Caliphate during Asmā'u's lifetime, was one important objective of her Ajami poetry. The most effective discursive weapon in this battle of political propaganda was the assertion of the sainthood (Arabic *wilāya*) of the Shehu and its resulting conclusions: the divine inspiration behind his jihad and the creation of the Caliphate, the divine protection of the institution of the Caliphate and the

⁸⁰ It is important to note here that only evil or hurtful spells and charms, and not all forms of esoteric intervention, are being condemned.

⁸¹ "Obey your leaders, listen to what they say/ It is your religious duty regardless of their characters./ Whether they are good or bad, you must obey them:/ Those who refuse because the rulers do not benefit them/ Will burn Hereafter, Be Sure of God's Truth: (Ibid., 49, verse 10); "Those with a case should seek legal redress/ Instead they choose to go to influential people/ ... If the judge summons you, you must go:/ To refuse the call is to disobey God. Go to the judge, and do not look elsewhere./ Anyone who refuses to answer the summons of a judge/ Will be summoned by the Fire, Be Sure of God's Truth" (Ibid., vv. 14-5).

guidance and protection for the successors leading it, the *baraka* for all those who followed in the Shehu's path, and the curse of divine disfavor against any who opposed Caliphate or Caliph. We have seen how the Shehu's miracles and pious behavior were invoked by Asmā'u's husband Gidāḍo and her brother Isa to confirm his status as the *mujaddid*. His visions of 'Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī and Muhammad were certainly the climaxes of this hagiographic cycle (as such visions often are in the lives of many Muslim saints and mystics), giving the Shehu himself and his mission direct links to both the Seal of the Prophets (Arabic *khātim al-anbiyā'*) and the Seal of the Saints (Arabic *khātim al-awliyā'*), the dual branches of humanity blessed with divine favor. Another important pattern, again common in the biographies of saints, is the drawing of parallels between the Shehu's life and the *sīra* of the Prophet. Biographical poems like Asmā'u's "The Journey" and the oral traditions of the Shehu's life are full of such parallels, including: the arrival of special mystical communications beginning at age forty; the exile from Gobir construed as the Shehu's *hijra*; the pledge of allegiance under a tree; the handing out of battle flags to his companions; sending envoys to neighboring kingdoms inviting them to join him; the battles of Kwatto, Alkalawa and Alwasa being likened to the battles of Badr, the Ditch, and Uhud, respectively; staying in Sokoto after the jihad's victory rather than Degel, just as the Prophet stayed in Medina rather than Mecca; and ruling in Sokoto for only two years, just as the Prophet lived for only two years after the victory over the Meccans.⁸² Finally, eschatological themes played an important role in establishing the Shehu's status as well as the urgency of following him. Both the Shehu

⁸² For "The Journey," see Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 131-154; for the oral traditions given by Waziri Junaidu, see *ibid.*, 7.

and Muhammad Bello wrote extensively about the Signs of the Hour and its imminent arrival, and about the Mahdī, the awaited savior who will bring justice to the believers just before the return of Jesus heralds the coming of the Last Day.⁸³ The Shehu wrote a “Song of the Mahdī” (*Wakar Mahadi*) in Hausa in which he described his attributes, and in another poem in Arabic, *Munasaba*, he described himself as a precursor to the Mahdī, “like the wind before a storm.”⁸⁴ Asmā’u referenced the Mahdī in her poem “Remembrance of the Shehu” and described his coming in her own work on “Signs of the Day of Judgment.”⁸⁵

With the Shehu’s sainthood established, Asmā’u and others could go on to write of the spread of his *baraka* to his family and disciples, through inheritance, learning from him, following his example, staying in his presence, and devotion to him. The oral tradition speaks of Asmā’u’s own mystical intervention in the battle of Alkalawa while she was still a teenager.⁸⁶ Writing during a time of great difficulty for the Caliphate in 1856, she remembered the great victory of Muhammad Bello at Gawakuke, praising him as a master of knowledge of the outer (Arabic *ẓāhir*) as well as the inner (Arabic *bāṭin*) who could see the unseen. She went on to affirm the chain linking Bello to his father and then to the Prophet: “He stood by the truth, thus following in the footsteps of the Prophet.

⁸³ Mahdism is of central importance to Islamic belief throughout West Africa as in much of the rest of the Islamic world: this is attested by the Mahdist movement in Sudan in the 1880s just as much as by so many other eschatological and millenarian movements throughout history. The Mahdī does not appear explicitly in the Quran, nor in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections of Bukhārī or Muslim, and his existence was denied by Ghazzālī, but several dozen traditions about the Mahdī can be found in the ḥadīth collections of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, who preceded Bukhārī and Muslim and did not qualify the soundness of what he collected as they did. While the Mahdī has been an important figure particularly in popular movements, his denial by some within the scholarly elite should not lead us to consider Mahdism as one criterion separating the scholars from the masses, as indeed the writings of Usuman ‘Dan Fodio and Muhammad Bello illustrate.

⁸⁴ Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma’u*, 7.

⁸⁵ Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma’u*, 222, 300.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 11.

As the Shehu had done, so did Bello.”⁸⁷ In the elegies Asmā’u wrote for other members of her family and important disciples of the Shehu, she continually invoked these parallels of behavior; and in the prayer invocations that end all the elegies, *wa’azī* poems, praise poems and most other works, there are repeated calls to follow the way of the Shehu, Jīlānī, Rifā‘ī, Badawī, and Dasūqī (three other Sufī saints who founded orders), and the Prophet, along with prayers for the believers to be saved for their sakes and to rejoin them all in heaven.

Taken as a whole, the Hausa and Fulfulde Ajami literature traditions of Hausaland show examples of local Islamic discourses from a movement which sought to enact social change and establish an Islamic society based on the three fundamental and mutually reinforcing axes of knowledge, action, and *baraka*. The most common types of texts are meant to instruct on basic points of belief and practice (rituals, points of creed, knowledge of the Hereafter and how to prepare for it) as well as to exhort and mobilize towards proper behavior, and they come from and complement a context of widespread Quranic instruction and preaching. Other types of texts are meant to motivate learning and action and spread *baraka* through the praise of exemplary figures, their pious behavior and their profound knowledge. *Baraka*, the blessing that comes from knowledge applied through righteous good deeds, spreads throughout the community of believers offering prosperity, guidance, protection, hope, and the motivation to work toward increased knowledge and positive action. It comes through invocation, as in the retelling of the story of the Prophet or the Shehu in order to invoke their love, or Asmā’u’s poem

⁸⁷ Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma’u*, 234.

invoking the names of the suras of the Quran (with none of their explicit content),⁸⁸ or the invocations of one person on behalf of another, more effective according to the spiritual advancement of the one invoking. It is the inner, unseen, unquantifiable, implicit element to the outer and explicit.

While the works of Nana Asmā'u and her family clearly display the ideals of their movement, their success in realizing those ideals within the society of the Sokoto Caliphate is a different story, and it is here the Boyd and Mack's analyses can at times gloss over some of the more difficult issues surrounding the Caliphate's ruling elite and their subjects. First is the issue of an ethnic divide fostering severe differences in status between the Fulbe conquerors and the Hausa of Gobir. While Boyd and Mack emphasize that the Shehu, Asmā'u and others welcomed all people equally and invited all to learn,⁸⁹ they make only one brief reference to the fact that, "Between 1810 and 1835, very large numbers of non-Muslim women were captured and put into concubinage by Muslims," dryly commenting that such a situation may have fostered passive resistance to the movement's re-education program.⁹⁰ The persistence of the *Bori* into the post-independence period shows that the movement did not fully assimilate its women subjects.

Further evidence of the divide in the movement's vernacular education program can be seen in the preponderance of Fulfulde writings, which outnumber Hausa works thirty-four to sixteen in Boyd and Mack's collection. While most of these are elegies for family

⁸⁸ Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 38-42.

⁸⁹ As does the Ajami literature they present, e.g., Asmā'u's praise of Muhammad Bello: "Fulani, Tuaregs and Hausas – everyone/ Including Arabs, every single person who arrived was unfailingly welcomed" (ibid., 234).

⁹⁰ Ibid., 68.

and friends that would call for the intimacy of Asmā'u's mother tongue, there are also histories of the movement's campaigns and exhortations against its enemies that remained untranslated into Hausa, suggesting that not only the elite scholars but also the military rank and file of the Caliphate were Fulbe. The situation is further complicated by the fact that most works were written in Fulfulde or Arabic years before they were adapted into Hausa, often by different authors. Other scholars have interpreted these differences in dating to an initial prejudice among the conquerors, who linked Fulfulde to an Islamic identity and Hausa to a *Habe*⁹¹ identity, doubting the appropriateness of Hausa as a language of Islamic instruction; they have even cited the existence of Hausa-language oral traditions of Islamic instruction which flourished as a form of resistance to Fulbe hegemony in the early years of the Caliphate.⁹² There is also the fact that Asmā'u's work on Prophetic Medicine was composed only in Arabic, which may mean that she only trusted its Quranic therapies in the hands of Arabophone scholars, even though she would have had students capable of reciting the suras while incapable of reading such a work. Finally, there are those works which make only oblique references to elements of Islamic history and thought, such as the works of *sīra* and especially the poem "Sufi Women." Without the oral contexts in which the written texts were given and received, we are left to speculate as with other Ajami works about the depth of accompanying knowledge for the average listener. Although undertaking to present the interpretive discourses surrounding these texts is entirely a separate endeavor from their literary

⁹¹ A Hausa word meaning "pagan," used derogatorily by the Fulani to refer to the pre-jihad Hausa kingdoms and, by extension, Hausa people and pre-jihad culture.

⁹² See Louis Brenner and Murray Last, "The Role of Language in West African Islam," *Africa* 55, 1985, 436-437.

presentation and translation, such issues of stratification in society, stratification in the education program and linguistic and cultural alienation receive only brief mention in the analysis.

Historical texts in Hausa Ajami (the genre of *tārīḥī*) provide a hitherto untapped source for understanding local perspectives on history in the region. Extensive historical manuscripts in Hausa have been documented not only in Hausaland, but also in Northern Ghana, where a diaspora of Jula/Wangara traders have used Hausa as a language of Islamic instruction and scholarship. In some cases the known texts were written by local scholars at the request of colonial officials, as in the case of the historical texts collected for Rev. Charles Robinson.⁹³ Others, like the brief manuscripts dealing with the history of Wurno (a *ribāṭ* founded by Muhammad Bello) presented by Philips, are solely the products of an autochthonous scholarly tradition.⁹⁴ A significant body of Hausa texts written by Alhaji Umaru of Kano and dealing with the histories of several Hausa cities, peoples of Northern Ghana, the Fulbe of Masina and the origins of the Fulbe, has been edited and translated by Piłaszewicz. The latter has also published a partial translation of a 1914 Hausa manuscript from Northern Ghana detailing the wars of Samori Ture and the Zarma conquests of the Volta region.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, this body of sources has yet to be treated to historical analysis, and has not been integrated into the works of historians.

⁹³ Charles H. Robinson, *Specimens of Hausa Literature*, Cambridge 1896.

⁹⁴ John E. Philips, "A History Manuscript in Hausa Ajami from Wurno, Nigeria by Malam Haliru Mahammad Wurno," *History in Africa*, 16 (1989), 389-395; Philips, "Two Arabic/Hausa Histories from Wurno," *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies*, 4 (1989), 192-210.

⁹⁵ Stanislaw Piłaszewicz, *Hausa prose writings in Ajami by Alhaji Umaru from A. Mischlich / H. Sölken's collection* (Berlin: Reimer, 2000); Piłaszewicz, *The Zabarma conquest of North-West Ghana and Upper Volta : a hausa narrative "Histories of Samory and Babatu and others" by Mallam Abu* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1992).

Often the texts are edited and presented by scholars of African linguistics, reflecting the tendency of Ajami literatures to fall in between the cracks formed by the boundaries of other disciplines such as anthropology, history, and Islamic studies.

6. The Wolofal Tradition in Senegambia and the Murīdiyya

The Wolof Ajami literature of Senegal (known locally as *Wolofal*, meaning “Wolofized”) provides yet another case of an extensive, yet hitherto barely studied, body of texts and accompanying literacy practices which have been inspired by local Islamic movements, and which represent local Islamic discourses and document inside perspectives. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time of drastic social, political and economic change as well as frequent crisis and instability in Senegambia, saw the emergence and rapid growth of numerous popular Islamic movements. Of these, the most lasting impact in the area has come from the Murīdiyya, founded by Aḥmadu Bamba, the local branches of the Tijāniyya, and, to a lesser extent, the Laayeen and the Qādiriyya. As locally founded *ṭariqas*, informed by the other Sufi orders and streams of Islamic thought operating in the region and yet also distinctly grounded in local knowledge and cultural traditions, the Murīdiyya and Laayeen orders have fostered traditions of Ajami literature in addition to Arabic scholarship. On the other hand, while the Wolof Tijāniyya branch of Malik Sy has produced some Ajami literature, and elaborated a rich oral Islamic discourse in Wolof, the Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya in general retain a focus on Arabic literacy. The Murīd Wolofal tradition, however, remains singular in terms of its scope, popularity and continuing expansion, an indicator and an actual

element of the movement's dynamism and growth: today a flourishing private publishing industry prints and reprints classics of Wolofal poetry as well as new poems and expanding genres of prose; several generations of authors, young and old, in many communities compose their own unpublished works while a considerable population of Ajami literates use the script for informal, functional and ephemeral purposes such as ledgers, memorabilia, signs and notices; and pieces and elements of Murīd discourse that were codified in Wolofal literature pass back into the oral domain, not only through formal recitings or media but in the daily exchanges and reflections of all kinds of people, whether they are Murīds (or aware of the literary origins of their words) or not.

Western academic examinations of Wolofal literature have focused on how it represents the confluence of local values and traditions with Sufi Islam, as well as its demonstration and celebration of Murīd cultural and economic autonomy. The Murīd discourse places special emphasis on *tarbiya*, spiritual discipline (from Arabic *tarbiyya*), gained through hard work, and spiritual knowledge acquired and realized through action. Hard work and discipline, already a fact of life in the Sahel, is naturally a central element of Islamic discourses and Sufi pedagogies as well. The special emphasis on *tarbiya* in the Murīd pedagogy is shown by its explicit acknowledgment as a form of worship and a way toward self-purification and dignity, and by the existence of the *daara tarbiya* or work school. These were established alongside the schools of Quranic and advanced Islamic instruction and intended for those who were beyond schooling age, so that everyone would be offered a role to give his or her own effort toward spiritual

advancement and the benefit of the community.⁹⁶ Bamba's emphasis on offering a role to everyone regardless of background was central to the early growth of the movement, which acquired many new adherents from among rural peasant and former slave populations; it also provoked criticism from some Islamic scholarly elites who viewed Bamba's methods as unorthodox. Bamba's motivations, stemming in part from his personal experience and a desire to respond to the problems facing his people and time, and also from his intellectual engagement with classic Arabic Sufi texts, are explained in his Arabic writings of the period and further explored in Cheikh Anta Babou's biography.⁹⁷ The *tarbiya* and communitarian ethics feature prominently in Wolofal literature, as do references to classical Sufi ideas of spiritual advancement, evoked to praise Bamba's saintly status as well as to express the states achievable through devotion to him. Other central values of the Murīd ethos are peacefulness, generosity, and patient forbearance, as exemplified by Bamba's behavior during his periods of exile in Gabon and Mauritania. As celebrated in the epic cycle *Jasaawu Sakkóór* by the pre-eminent Wolofal poet Muusaa Ka, Bamba's ability to sublimate extreme hardships into ever-increasing stages of nearness to God not only provides the ultimate example and inspiration to Murīds for whatever struggles they may face in their own lives, it also proves his divine election to the ranks of the *abdāl* (what Louis Massignon termed the "apotropaic saints," from the Arabic root b-d-l, which connotes meanings of exchange

⁹⁶ A description of Bamba's pedagogy has been offered by the Murīd scholar Muḥammadu Maḥmūd Ñañ in a Wolofal prose work of historical and social research, *Jaar-Jaari Boroom Tuubaa* (The Itineraries of Boroom Tuubaa), and analyzed in Fallou Ngom, "Aḥmadu Bamba's Pedagogy and the Development of 'Ajamī Literature," *African Studies Review* 52 (2009), 104-107.

⁹⁷ Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad* (Athens, OH: University of Ohio Press, 2007).

and substitution) and the abundant *baraka* that his victorious mission offers them toward success in this world and the next.⁹⁸

Typical of writers from other Ajami traditions, Muusaa Ka was an Arabophone intellectual, steeped in the texts and ideas of the local Islamic educational tradition. He was working as a scribe and calligrapher in Bamba's community when, according to the oral tradition, Bamba personally gave him the charge of composing poems in Wolof in order to "make the message clear to the disciples."⁹⁹ As cited by Sana Camara, and Dieng and Faye, Ka reiterated that he was composing in Wolof not for lack of competence in Arabic but in order to enlighten his people, just as Cerno Mambeyaa had in the *Oogirde Malal*.¹⁰⁰ But where Mambeyaa's defense of using his own language was nearly apologetic, Ka asserted that Wolof was equally capable of literary merit and in no way inferior to Arabic, when he wrote the following:

The beauty of Wolof, and of Arabic, and of all tongues is equal
Whatever is offered for the sake of the Messenger of God will be succulent in its
essence.¹⁰¹

Throughout his career, the social importance of Ka's work was reaffirmed by his being commissioned by Bamba's descendants and other important Murīds to write Wolofal elegies and poems informing the people about specific topics.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Bamba is given the title of *Khādim al-rasūl*, translated as "privileged servant of the Prophet." For some discussion of the elements of Sufi intellectual discourse apparent in the *Jasaawu Sakkóór*, as well as the depiction of the exile as Bamba's mission and the crowning achievement of his hagiography, see the introductory essay in Bassirou Dieng and Dia Faye, *L'Épopée de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba de Serigne Moussa Ka: Jasaawu Sakkóór u Gééj Gi, Jasaawu Sakkóór u Jéeri Ji* (Presses Universitaires de Dakar, 2006) as well as their translation of the two poems. For examples of Ka's expressions of spiritual ecstasy in his devotion to Bamba, see Sana Camara, "A'jami Literature in Senegal: The Example of Sëriñ Muusaa Ka, Poet and Biographer," *Research in African Literatures* 28 (1997), 167 and 176-177.

⁹⁹ Dieng & Faye, *L'Épopée de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba*, 29.

¹⁰⁰ Camara, "A'jami Literature in Senegal," 170.

¹⁰¹ Dieng & Faye, *L'Épopée de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba*, 26-27.

Muusaa Ka's voluminous body of writings exemplifies the purposes of Wolofal literature and the combination of discursive elements from Wolof and classical Islamic cultures employed to achieve those purposes. Camara writes of Ka's extensive use of imagery and language connected to the wrestling champion, a Wolof archetypal hero who is also an object of traditional praise poetry (Wolof *bakk*).¹⁰³ Ka reappropriates the cultural value of the wrestler figure to praise his new hero for society, with metaphors that allude to Bamba's inner strength, and his victory in the spiritual battle taking place in the arena of the present age: a battle that is also referred to, with a term taken from the *ḥadīth*, as the *Jihād al-akbar*, "the Greater Jihad."¹⁰⁴ In addition to the praise found in elegies and other commemorative works, and the invocations of *baraka* that form a significant element of Wolofal exhortative poetry, social criticism forms another major theme of Ka's work, as it does in other Ajami traditions. Often with as much barbed wit as righteous indignation, Ka indicts the decadence and violence of the Wolof kingdoms and their royal warriors (the *Ceddo*), the Islamic elites who failed to put Islamic values into practice and collaborated against Bamba, and hypocritical Murīd shaykhs who fall prey to materialism and the love of power, abusing their status to become rich through

¹⁰² Camara, "A'jami Literature in Senegal," 168, states that both volumes of *Jasaawu Sakkóór* were commissioned on separate occasions by members of Bamba's immediate family.

¹⁰³ Camara, "A'jami Literature in Senegal," 172-173.

¹⁰⁴ This *ḥadīth*, which is judged to contain weak links in its chain of narration, implies that the jihad of the sword is the "lesser jihad" and then explicitly states that the greater jihad is the struggle of the servant against his desires (*mujāhadat al-'abd hawā*). Another *ḥadīth* said to be from the Prophet's last pilgrimage, which features in more prominent classical collections, says that the struggler (*mujāhid*) is the one who struggles against the ego or lower self (*jihād al-nafs*).

their disciples, and pretending to high spiritual stations and mystical powers for their own gain.¹⁰⁵

Murīd culture and discourses have adopted pre-Islamic Wolof imagery and vocabulary, artistic forms, and even elements of ritual and ceremony. Gerard, in his brief overview of Wolofal poetry, attests to the use of rhythms from the local oral literature over Classical Arabic meter and prosody.¹⁰⁶ Beyond the Wolofal literature, Dieng and Faye refer to the adoption into the Murīd discourse and educational milieu of elements from the old Wolof kingdoms and the status of servanthood to the king, reappropriated to describe the values of submission to the shaykh (Wolof *njebbëlu*), obedience to the his command (*ndigal*), and servitude toward God.¹⁰⁷ While such reappropriation of local cultural imagery recalls Nana Asmā'u's *Yan Taru*, the Murīdiyya differs significantly from the Shehu's movement in its adoption of local ritual elements. The more sober Sufi tradition is represented by solo or choral singing of Bamba's poems (Wolof *xassayitt*, from Arabic *qaṣā'id*, plural of *qaṣīda*, ode) unaccompanied by instruments. The Murīd *sikar* (from Arabic *dhikr*), on the other hand, is an unrestrained shouting of short refrains of praise for spiritual leaders in Wolof (or Arabic *lā ilāha ill' Allah*, the first part of the *shahada*), either sung across the fields as a work song or as a group performance with

¹⁰⁵ See Camara, "A'jami Literature in Senegal," 173, and the final passages of *Jasaawu Sakkóór bu Yoonu Jéeri ji*, in Dieng and Faye, *L'Épopée de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba*.

¹⁰⁶ Albert Gérard, *African Language Literatures* (Washington, D. C.: Three Continents, 1981),

¹⁰⁷ Dieng and Faye, *L'Épopée de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba*, where they cite the use of the archaic word *njawriñ*, a designee or magistrate of the sovereign (Jean-Léopold Diouf, *Dictionnaire wolof-francais et francais-wolof* (Paris: Karthala, 2003); the word appears as "jagodin" in Portuguese travel accounts as early as 1594: Hair, "An Ethnolinguistic Inventory of the Upper Guinea Coast"), used to refer to a senior member of the *daara tarbiya*. Submission and devotion to one's shaykh are also fundamental elements of Sufism which figure prominently in all of the classical Sufi manuals, the *Kitāb al-Futuwwa* of al-Sulamī (d. 1021) being one of the earliest of these.

jubilant drumming and call-and-response singing. When the *sikar* features in a *cànt* (“ceremony of thanks,” from the verbal noun for *sant*, “to be grateful”) a festive evening of chanting, attendees often form a slow dancing circle around the musicians; some attendees, moved to heightened states, may exhibit ecstatic behaviors including shrieking, loss of body control and extreme physical feats. Group chanting, drumming, dancing, and ecstatic behavior have all been observed among Murīds from during Bamba’s lifetime.¹⁰⁸ These elements may have their sources in local spirit possession ceremonies and other pre-Islamic rituals, although more research on the subject is needed; and while sound-induced trance possession is a common feature of mystical groupings throughout the Islamic world, it is not widely documented in Islamic ceremonies in West Africa, where such behaviors were considered a hallmark of paganism and targeted by the reformist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their validity in some Murīd discourses can be considered representative of the tolerance and openness that is another key feature of the Murīdiyya. Ngom has written about how the Murīd sense of pride and cultural autonomy has allowed them to embrace parts of other cultures, including those of the West even during colonialism and post-colonialism.¹⁰⁹

A further result of the Murīd sense of pride and openness is their willingness to share knowledge with others, stemming from a belief in the universalism of Bamba’s message and the *baraka* they may receive from spreading it. Murīd oral and written sources are

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter 5 for early references to ecstatic devotion in Murīd hagiographical sources; and David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim societies and French colonial authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000), 224, which includes a colonial depiction of a group of several Murīd soldiers chanting in the trenches in the First World War.

¹⁰⁹ Fallou Ngom, “Taboo-Racism toward Blacks in the Arab-Muslim World: Some Murīd Perspectives,” *Arena Journal* 32-33 (2010), 236-53.

thus relatively easily accessible to outsiders, often in contrast to other knowledge traditions in the region, in which knowledge, as a source of power, remains tightly guarded, and is often only transferred within the same family across generations, or to an initiate or apprentice whose loyalty and preparation have been well-established (to say nothing of worthy skepticism toward inquisitive foreigners). This “closed economy of knowledge” applies even more to the negotiations of the unseen practiced within the esoteric sciences, and matches the initiatic hierarchies and secrecies of Sufi traditions. This study has benefited greatly from the broad scope of Wolofal texts in several genres which were easily acquired on the open market or through willing lending.

There remains a significant amount of work to be done in documenting and analyzing the texts and contexts of the Murīd Wolofal tradition. While Muusaa Ka’s life and works have received some attention, references to the equal importance of other contemporaries of his in the first generation of Murīd Wolofal writers, including Mbay Jaxate, Samba Jaara Mbay and Mor Xayre, among others, have yet to be succeeded by published works. Upon the foundation of the significant bodies of work put forth by these first writers, and Murīd discourses in Arabic and Wolof elaborated by Aḥmadu Bamba and other significant figures including his successors and disciples, subsequent generations of writers have expanded the tradition. Fallou Ngom has highlighted the work of two such writers, Muḥammadu Maḥmūd Ñañ and Baay Masoxna Ló, but there are many more, including not only poets like Aḥmadu Njoñ, but also a growing number of writers composing research works in prose, including historians, biographers and translators such as El Hajji Mbàkke, Muḥammadu Bashīr Muntaqā Mbàkke, and Omar Kan. The potential

contributions of these writers and their sources to our understanding of history and thought in the region can no longer be overlooked.

There is also work to be done in describing the symbolic, social and physical spaces in which these texts are produced and then disseminated. As recent studies in literacy have shown, the meaning of a text is created by the context of its reading, which in turn is formed by cultural paradigms regarding the constitution, acquisition and transmission of knowledge, forms of linguistic expression, and identity.¹¹⁰ While it is clear that Wolofal literacy is interdependent both with forms of Arabic literacy as well as oral discourses, the interrelations between oral and written and between Arabic and Wolof, in cultural practice as well as in thought, have yet to be studied in depth, as can be said of all Ajami traditions.

7. Ajami Traditions in the Mande World

The case of Ajami literatures in Mande languages remains one of the least studied in Western scholarship. Those texts which have been presented and analyzed illustrate some of the dimensions of Islamic belief and practice in West Africa, showing how Arabo-Islamic discourses and local ones interact to inform concepts of history, social identity, and health. The five short Bamanankan texts presented by Tamari, written early in the last century by a Fulbe Islamic practitioner of the Middle Niger, offer clear examples.

The first text, entitled “The Great Well of Karantela,” describes ceremonies performed at

¹¹⁰ See for example James Paul Gee, *Social linguistics and literacies: ideology in discourses* (London: Routledge, 2008) and *An introduction to discourse analysis: theory and method* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Niko Besnier, *Literacy, Emotion and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Brian Street, ed., *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

the well annually by local fishermen for the safety and prosperity of the community, and ceremonies for newborn babies to be recognized by the well, which remains hidden and forbidden to strangers. The second text enumerates the steps and legal requirements for the performance of the Islamic major ablution (*Ar ghusl*), while the third is a homiletic regarding basic elements of Islamic creed and the recognition of divine omnipotence. The fourth text is a plant-based remedy for ailments of the male reproductive organs, which concludes, “God has said for medicines to made with writing and with plants. We will obtain benefit if the King, who is God, so wills.”¹¹¹ The final text offers a general remedy for sufferers of chronic maladies, in which the healer makes invocations to a local medicinal tree (*Guiera senegalensis*) while the patient places his or her hand on the trunk, then collects leaves to cook and give to the patient to drink. This collection of texts from the same author, seemingly intended for sharing with other Islamic practitioners, demonstrates a worldview in which local knowledge traditions and healing strategies join happily with Islamic ideas of health and concepts of God as the ultimate source of healing and prosperity.

The *Tārīkh Mandinka* of Bijini, a three-part manuscript of local history in Arabic and Mandinka from a village in present day Guinea-Bissau, is among the most fascinating of any Ajami texts examined in Western scholarly literature to date. It represents the collective memory, as preserved by local Muslim families, of a multi-ethnic, multicultural community living on a site of economic and spiritual importance within the confederated kingdom of Kaabu (also known as the Empire of Kaabu or Ngaabu), which

¹¹¹ Tal Tamari, “Cinq Textes Bambara en Caractères Arabes,” *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* 8 (1994), 120.

at its height stretched from the southern bank of the Gambia River to the northern bank of the Corubal until it was conquered by Fulbe chiefs of Labé under the alamate of Timbo in the late 19th century. The text offers an internal view of the genesis of the hybrid Mandinka Soninke identity which was the cultural foundation of the Kaabu confederation.

The ruling lineages of Kaabu, as well as their client lineages including blacksmiths, leatherworkers and Islamic practitioners, saw themselves as matrilineal descendants of successive waves of emigrants from Manden, giving them symbolic historical ties to the great Mali empire, its expansion and later commercial and clerical diasporas (such as the Jula and Jakhanke), as well as symbolic political ties to other nearby configurations of westward Mande expansion including Niani and Wuli on the north bank of the Gambia River.¹¹² At the same time, the rulers and lesser nobles of Kaabu considered themselves patrilineal descendants of even earlier Mande expansion as well as nobility from local peoples (Pajadinka, Bassari, Jóóla Biafada, Baynunk) who ruled former kingdoms, giving them a status of original inhabitants and “masters of the earth” that was shared by villagers accommodating incoming waves of Mandinka “strangers.”¹¹³ The result was a diverse and complex *brassage* in which local cultural practices and knowledge traditions (the *Soninke* or “pagan” ways) coexisted alongside Mande social formations (the *ñàmaala* artisan “castes”) and Mandinka Muslim knowledge traditions. Political, social and economic roles and relations were regulated by clan allegiances establishing

¹¹² Cornelia Giesing and Valentin Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini (Guinée-Bissau): La mémoire des Mandinka et des Sòoninke du Kaabu* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 161-170, 245-251.

¹¹³ Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 188, 252, 277.

relationships such as clientage, mutual exogamy (Mandinkakan *dànkutu* and its accompanying *sànwuyaa* or “laughing cousins” relations), and adoption of “stranger” clans as the “younger brothers” or “maternal nephews” of “host” clans.¹¹⁴ Shared genealogies and generations of living together blurred some of these divisions, allowing many people to avow multiple cultural identities in varying contexts: this is symbolized in the *Tārikh Mandinka*’s historiography of Kaabu’s founding settlers, who are all said to arrive as Mandinka Muslims, but slowly adopt the *Soninke* lifestyles of their neighbors while continuing to evoke their Mandinka heritage.¹¹⁵

In noticeable contrast to all the other Ajami sources reviewed thus far, the *Tārikh Mandinka* does not borrow any themes or idioms from the Classical Arabo-Islamic literary tradition. In fact, beyond the customary invocations that open and close some pages and sections of the manuscript, little in the text can be called explicitly Islamic. The *Tārikh Mandinka* limits itself completely to local history, and while Muslims figure as important characters, no overt references are made to the Quran or Sunna, Islamic law, prophetic biography, popular prophetic traditions, hagiography, asceticism, or any of the other themes present in the Fuuta Jalon or Hausaland traditions. Instead, the first section, which relates the founding of the first settlements of Kaabu by emigrants from Manden, and the second section, which narrates the mythological origins of the three matrilineal ruling clans of Kaabu, both abound in local, non-Islamic archetypes and spiritual power structures. In the first section, the first founder of Kaabu, Sumaa Saanee, is accompanied by a man whose clan name (Kanbaayi) identifies him with noble warriors who became

¹¹⁴ Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 261-266, 289-291.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 58-71, oral commentary of reader and inheritor Al-Hajj Ibrahiima Kassama.

leatherworkers and clients of the nobility. After founding the first village, they move to other villages already inhabited by local people, and then found two new settlements which are both identified as centers for the Kanbaayi clan of leatherworkers, the name of the second village meaning “we will make our libations here,” a clear reference to *Soninke* practices.¹¹⁶ The second part of the manuscript, the only part written in Mandinka Ajami, describes the mythical mother figure of the ruling *ñàncò* clans as a Muslim woman from Manden, but of unknown parentage, who appears in the forest for mysterious reasons alluding to a past transgression. She hides in a cave accompanied by a younger sister or servant, only coming outside to perform ritual prayer. When sighted, she can only be caught by local blacksmiths of pure pedigree, and although she is then confined inside a hut with no entrance, she gives birth to three daughters, also of unknown patrilineage, who marry local princes and founding the three matrilineal ruling lines.¹¹⁷ Paradoxical complementarities, between noble warriors and *ñàmaala* artisan castes, male-run kingdoms in cities and female occult power in the forest, matrilineal and patrilineal descent, native and foreigner, centralizing political power as an occult power and members of lower classes that handle occult power as kingmakers, and between Islam and *Soninke* tradition, inform these myths of the formation of a state which incorporated very diverse groups.

The third section of the *Tārikh Mandinka*, detailing the wars and eventual conquest by Fulbe warriors of Futa Jalon, adopts a more Islamic historiography in its interpretation of the events. The economic prosperity and political expansion of Kaabu causes their

¹¹⁶ Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 53-55.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59-97, 175-182.

neighbors in the theocratic states of Fuuta Jalon to ask whether they are believers. The response, “No, they are *Soninke*,” prompts the aggression that begins with raids, but persists over two generations and grows to several wars of occupation, culminating in the destruction of the Kaabu capital at Kansalaa. The oral commentary of the manuscript’s official custodian, a descendant of one of the two Muslim families responsible for its transmission in Bijini, further develops the themes of the Mandinka “lapse” into *Soninke* ways, the injustices committed against Fulbe Muslims (both free and slave) by Kaabu nobles, and the motivation of leaders from Fuuta Jalon to defend and avenge their fellow Muslims as elements that brought divine punishment to Kaabu.¹¹⁸ Later sections of the history, dealing with a Bijini ruled by a Muslim *Àlkaali* and administered under Islamic law by a succession of imams, equally curse Fulbe chiefs who betrayed a truce between Muslims for an ethnic allegiance with Fulbe of the emergent Foroyaa kingdom.¹¹⁹ Alongside these explanations of divine punishment, the esoteric or spiritual strategies employed by both sides form another important theme of the narrative.¹²⁰

Giesing and Vydrine’s presentation and analysis of the *Tārikh Mandinka* of Bijini set the standard for the treatment of Ajami texts as aids to our understanding of African history, societies, and worldviews. In addition to transcription and translation, they are the first to offer a typeset edition of the manuscript, which maintains the letter forms of original’s Maghribī script and offers thorough notes on manuscript variants and unclear words as well as deviations from Classical Arabic. The manuscript, heavily annotated

¹¹⁸ Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 104-107.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 159. See also the argument of Kunbaa Daaboo Sori, born in Tuubaa, Fuuta Jalon to a captive mother of the *ñàncò* ruling clans of Kaabu, who states that the Fulbe jihad has been invalidated by local conversion among the people of Kaabu as well as by the abuses of Fulbe rulers (ibid., 115).

¹²⁰ Ibid., 108, 118-119.

with cross-references from historical and anthropological sources, is followed by an exhaustive analysis, informed by numerous scholarly writings, foreign written accounts and local oral interviews, which examines the text's mythological themes, the many groups that peopled Kaabu and Bijini, the geography and political economy of the region, and the roles of the manuscript's creators and transmitters both in the village's history and in the interpretation of that history.

A historical analysis of oral history and traveler's accounts examines patterns of Mande immigration and Mandeization of local rulers in the region going back more than five centuries. The region is established as a land of important trade routes and entrepôts for Saharan, and later Atlantic, commerce with Sierra Leone and Fuuta Jalon, as well as an important source of salt along the Geba River.¹²¹ Mandinka Muslims are attested in the area as early as Cadamosto as both traveling merchants, and as Islamic practitioners under the patronage of pagan *Soninke* kings, performing clerical works to ensure the latter's successful reigns and especially their success in war.¹²² These elements form the background of Mande expansion and the Mandinka *Soninke* identity informing the *Tārikh Mandinka*.

Further evidence then points to parallels between the *móori* or Islamic practitioners as a class and the *ñàmaala* artisan castes (including leatherworkers, blacksmiths and bards) within *Soninke* society: both were valued, and feared, for their secret knowledge and esoteric techniques, and became clients of rulers who were considered essential to their

¹²¹ Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 270-276.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 236-239, 245-248.

maintenance of power.¹²³ One major difference separating *ñàmaala* from *móori* was that the latter were not forbidden from marrying into ruling lineages. In Bijini, such was the case of the Saama clan, immigrant Mandinka Muslims who were taken in as “guests” to be the *móori* of the ruling *Soninke* Daaboo clan, and who married Daaboo women to become the “maternal nephews” of their “hosts.”¹²⁴ Later, when Suleymani Baa Baayoo (Bagayokho), a rich merchant and saint (*wàlli*) from Timbuktu, arrived in Bijini with a large consort of clients (including *móori*) and slaves, members of the leatherworking Jawara and Ture clans acted as his brokers, negotiating with the Daaboo on his behalf for the right to form a new settlement.¹²⁵ Local histories of interactions such as these help us to understand the roles of Muslims and Islamic knowledge vis-à-vis other groups and knowledge traditions in the region.

Suleymani Baa Baayoo is said to have brought with him Foodee Jaabi Kasama, son of Mama Sambu Kasama, a Jakhanke cleric who followed Al-Hajj Salīm Suware out of Jakha Masina to Jakha Bambuk.¹²⁶ Together with the Baayoo, Kasama scholars were responsible for the creation and transmission of the *Tārikh Mandinka* along with another manuscript, the *Tārikh Bijini*, all in Arabic, which describes the origins of Bijini in a dream had by Muhammad Bagayokho of Timbuktu, in which he saw a sacred land in the West blessed with many holy water sources.¹²⁷ The source of Ñanpenj Njaay, already a holy site overseen by Daaboo priestesses when Baayoo arrived, was considered an

¹²³ Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 258-268 discusses the special role of leatherworkers in the coronation of Kaabu and Biafada kings, and the pact of *dānkutu* informing their relations.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 285-286.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

¹²⁶ See Sanneh, *The Jakhanke Muslim Clerics*, 15-30.

¹²⁷ Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 251.

important site of spiritual power for all of Kaabu. Although the Baayoo became co-rulers of Bijini with the Daaboo, the Daaboo maintain exclusive rights to the waters of Ñanpeñ Njaay, while the Baayoo have their own sacred source, Jinnabaa, at the opposite corner of the village. The spirit of Ñanpeñ Njaay is Muslim, while the spirit of Jinnabaa is pagan, and water from the two sources will cause explosion if they come in contact with each other.¹²⁸ In Giesing's analysis, this mélange of shared traditions is a result of the peaceful and harmonious Islamic clerical tradition that Sanneh argued is exemplified by the Jakhanke. While the *Tārikh Bijini* tells the story of the village from the foreigner's perspective, the *Tārikh Mandinka* preserves local mythological elements, and perhaps recasts or coopts them, as part of an effort to proselytize while acknowledging and living in harmony with non-Muslim traditions.¹²⁹

Giesing returns to trade and slavery as two significant themes in the history of Kaabu which only come out in between the lines of the *Tārikh Mandinka*. The founding of Bijini incorporating several nearby villages is not simply due to the size of Suleymani Baayoo's entourage. Oral sources explain that the village's site at the top of a hill had until then been too dangerous for settlement, because of its visibility to slave raiders along the Geba River. Baayoo's position as cofounder of the village was due in part to his ability to guarantee security through his warriors and slaves.¹³⁰ Walter Rodney wrote about the role of Kaabu in establishing and profiting from the Atlantic slave trade along the Upper

¹²⁸ See Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 337-341.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 181-182, 228-232.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 291.

Guinea coast.¹³¹ The significance of slaves within the society is attested by the *Tārikh Mandinka*'s references to "Fulbe captives" (*fúla jón*), slaves owned by the Fulbe of Kaabu (*fúla fóro*, "free Fulbe"), mostly Biafada in origin (but who became Fulbe under enslavement), who joined with the armies of Fuuta Jalon to bring an end to a weakened Kaabu.¹³² As the Fuuta Jalon states became more powerful, they wished to extend their borders to river ports in order to have their own access to the Atlantic trade. While living in peace with their trading neighbors of Kaabu, they tried to achieve this diplomatically by marrying with members of Kaabu noble lineages. While Kaabu noble men were allowed to marry Fulbe women, the opposite was much rarer, so that nobles with Fulbe descent would not enter into the *ñàncó* lineages and become eligible to rule. As a result, some nobles of Fulbe descent began converting themselves to *ñàncó*, forming a new class called the *yèlemādi ñàncó* ("those transformed into *ñàncó*"). When a member of this group became eligible for the throne of Badoora (the kingdom in which Bijini was located), public refusal in Bijini caused him to take his case to the leader of the Fulbe captives, prefiguring a devastating attack in 1884 in which the village was burned down.¹³³

Giesing's analysis does the important work of introducing us to a world whose people defy easy categorization. Upon closer examination, elements of cultural identity such as ethnicity, religion, class and occupation display a certain fluidity and even polyvalence. The analysis of the *Tārikh Mandinka* can help us to understand other Mandinka Ajami

¹³¹ Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 112-159.

¹³² Giesing and Vydrine, *Ta:rikh Mandinka de Bijini*, 157-159.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 219.

texts, such as the “Pakao Book”, a manuscript which, like the *Tārikh Mandinka*, comprises two sections in Arabic and another in Mandinka Ajami: while the Arabic sections deal with the genealogy of those who founded the first mosques in the area, the Mandinka text recalls the names of the chief priestesses responsible for circumcision in each of the villages named in the other sections, and labels itself as an therapeutic prayer text, stating that “if a man wraps his body in this, he will always have a good supply of women.”¹³⁴ The Pakao Book’s invocation of pre-Islamic and female spiritual power is easier to understand in light of the analysis of the *Tārikh Mandinka* and the cultural *brassage* out of which it arose.

The subtleties brought to light by Giesing are the result of careful reading, and one of the most important points in her reading is the placement of the written text as closely as possible in its original context, in the hands of a qualified reader. The written manuscript is presented alongside field tapes of its reading by Al-Hajj Ibrahiima “Koobaa” Kassama, a ninth generation descendant of Foodee Jaabi Kasama who inherited custodianship of the text. Along with his reading is another record of the history of Kaabu, presented to colonial researchers and published in Portuguese in 1948. The *Tārikh Mandinka*, like many other literary works of history, contains many obscure references and ellipses which are understandable only to those who have already learned the stories behind them; in some ways, the written text can be considered a mnemonic for recalling a much broader body of knowledge that has been transmitted orally. Kassama’s oral commentary goes far beyond the written text, at least tripling it in length, and provides meaningful

¹³⁴ Matthew Schaffer, “Pakao Book: An Introduction to Pakao Expansion and Social Structure by Virtue of an Indigenous Manuscript,” *African Languages* 1 (1975), 122.

background as well as interpretation of events. Remarkably, the local history recorded in 1948 fits neatly alongside Kassama's commentary, matching it not only in structure but in many instances echoing it almost word for word. The result is more than an argument for the need to examine Ajami literature within the context of its oral performance – it is an argument for the existence of a separate but equally codified oral text, coexistent and codependent with the written text, which is transmitted along with it.

8. Conclusion

This chapter has been an attempt to gather Western scholarly works regarding some of the Ajami literatures and literacy traditions which have been active throughout sub-Saharan Africa, with a view toward outlining the scope and place of Ajami literatures within their cultures of origin, the potential value of Ajami texts in aiding our understanding of Africa, and the issues involved in the study of these texts and the contexts in which they are written and read. While each text presents its own particular issues, patterns emerge when Ajami literature is examined broadly as a category. In every case examined in this chapter, the advent of Ajami literacy has sprung from Quranic literacy and Islamic scholarship.¹³⁵ Islamic scholarship, in turn, has been present in parts of Sudanic Africa nearly since the beginning of Islam, and has been maintained and spread by a variety of actors of varying motivations: migrating clans of merchants and clerics with ties to networks reaching other parts of the Muslim world; scholars attached to the courts of kings as scribes, advisors, and practitioners of prayer; independent

¹³⁵ Although the degree of Islamization and relationship of Islam to other belief systems and practices is different in each case.

communities living under Muslim law with permission from local rulers; reformers protesting the perceived injustices of nobility and immoralities of common people, and seeking to proselytize, re-educate, and in some cases establish Islamic political regimes. Ajami texts reflect these situations and motivations, and often draw heavily from a common stream of Classical Arabic literary themes, styles and story cycles that come from the Quran and Sunna but also from popular literature and legend. Included among these themes are issues surrounding sainthood (*wilāya*), divine blessing (*baraka*), esoteric knowledge, and strategies for negotiating with or intervening through mystical forces, all elements of the spectrum of Islamic belief and practice. The presence of all of these themes – mystical, ethical, literary – within Ajami literatures demonstrates the connectedness of Islamic knowledge traditions in Sudanic Africa to knowledge traditions in the rest of the Islamic world, as well as the spread of these traditions from scholarly elites to other groups in society. The use of local languages broadly expands the potential audience, and hence the potential content, of Ajami literatures, as perhaps best evidenced by the *Tārīkh Mandinka* of Bijini’s radical departure from Classical Arabo-Islamic literature. However, all the literary traditions presented in this chapter reflect local discourses which have been informed in part by Islamic ideas, beliefs and practices.

Ajami texts offer us primary source perspectives that document phenomena and events while shedding light on the values and motivations working within them and the discourses through which those values are elaborated: often it is the internal discursive cohesion of Ajami texts, the assumption of certain background knowledge taken as a “given” from writer to reader to audience, that provides the most edifying looks into local

values and worldviews and sets them apart from colonial archives and other secondary sources. However, the fact that many things remain unspoken or obliquely alluded to also provides one of the greatest challenges to the analysis of these texts by outside scholars, who must bring their own background knowledge to the effort. As texts which have been considered important enough to be committed to writing, and often copied, in environments where paper is scarce, Ajami texts tend to consider very important issues, including physical, spiritual and economic well-being, cosmology and ontology, moral standards, harmony and conflict within the social order, memory and the interpretation of history, and cultural identity. Because Ajami literacies usually function on the popular side of diglossic literacy situations, in which elite scholarship and communication take place in Arabic, Ajami texts can represent voices from a broad section of the social spectrum, ranging from elites to local figures to the marginalized and subaltern. The more ephemeral and functional sides to Ajami literacies, such as financial records, private notes and correspondence, public announcements, signs, slogans and graffiti, have received little attention from scholars thus far outside the work of Ngom on the Murīd Wolofal milieu.¹³⁶

It can easily be seen from the texts presented in this chapter that Ajami literatures represent the Islamization of Africa across generations of learning, belief and practice. The Quran remains one of the core sources of local Islamic discourses, as traditions of

¹³⁶ Fallou Ngom, "Ajami Scripts in the Senegalese Speech Community," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 10 (2010), 1-23.

tafsīr in local languages, especially during the month of Ramadan, attest.¹³⁷ A second fundamental element of local Islamic discourses, drawn from the Quran and from the legal compilations of *fiqh* which come from the *ḥadīth*, regards the basic knowledge of theology and ritual practice which are considered the minimum requirements for a believer. Such texts remain among the most widespread in some Ajami traditions, reflecting concern for a core of dogmatic belief that can change in some elements with the rise of ideas and movements while staying relatively static in others. Important elements of Islamic belief also come from other sources of Classical Arabo-Islamic literature, including most notably the genres of *sīra* and *madīh*, narrating the life and deeds of Prophet Muhammad and praising his eminent status, and *qaṣṣāṣ*, dealing with the life stories of other prophets. Ajami praise poems in Swahili, Pular, Hausa and Wolof draw from the themes and imagery of these genres, and often from the same set of texts (the works of Būṣīrī, Fāzāzī, Juzūlī, etc.), to the point of translating entire poems in some cases. While the influence of these works across different traditions establishes them as part of the literary cannon of Islamic education in Africa, their appearance in Ajami demonstrates that they were brought into local discourses. The same can be said for the next important genre of Ajami literatures, homiletic, which draws largely from a corpus

¹³⁷ In addition to the Kanembu Quranic manuscripts analyzed above, Nana Asmā'u's elegy to Abdullahi Dan Fodio laments that she will miss his *tafsīr* during the nights of Ramadan, a common practice throughout African Muslim communities (Boyd & Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u* 34-8). Tamari examined a similar *tafsīr* tradition in Bamanankan, in which Quranic verses are broken into fragments and translated: see Tal Tamari, "L'Exégèse coranique (tafsīr) en milieu mandingue," *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* 10 (1996), 43-81. Brenner and Last examined a tradition of oral translation of a key doctrinal text into Fulfulde, the *'Aqīda al-ṣuḡhrā* (also known as the *Umm al-barāhīn*) of al-Sanūsī, displaying a similar pattern of dividing the text into short fragments, with many terms remaining untranslated or simply adapted to Fulfulde phonology (Arabic *arṣāq* becoming *arshike*, etc.): see Louis Brenner and Murray Last, "The Role of Language in West African Islam," *Africa* 55 (1985), 432-446.

of eschatological *ḥadīth* and sermons as well as Classical Arabic poetry drawing from the same sources.

Finally, the Islamization of Africa can be seen in the extent of hagiographic themes in Ajami literatures, demonstrating the importance of saints and other pious figures as motivating factors in upholding and spreading Islamic belief and practice. Individual and collective eulogies of scholars and other pious believers from Fuuta Jalon and Hausaland both lament that such people will be missed for their knowledge, for the living examples they provided, and for the *baraka* emanating from their presences. For the lesser scholars as well as for the great shaykhs and saints, knowledge and pious action leads to wielding mysterious, secret powers, through a divine favor that grants supplications through unseen forces. Such esoteric knowledge and power has been an element of orthodox belief throughout Islamic history, supported to a certain point by the remainder of Islamic scholarship and existing alongside other domains of knowledge and practice, and not the bizarre *maraboutism* and heretical superstition depicted by missionary, colonial, orientalist or Salafist lenses. In hagiographic cycles such as the “Song of the Shehu’s Miracles,” the heightened knowledge and powers of the saint are seen as the result of divine election as a renewer of the original prophetic mission, a theme made even clearer by parallels with prophetic biography and communication with other saints and with the Prophet himself.

Conversely, we can also see in Ajami literatures the Africanization of Islam through contact and popularization. First, Ajami literatures remain primarily oral literatures, meant to be recited, and are therefore inseparable from the social milieus of their origins.

Performance events may bring together other local cultural elements of performance, including music, singing, dancing, and norms of audience-performer interaction. Second, the use of local imagery and cultural archetypes, and rhythms and wordcraft from local oral literature shows a process of blending and recasting in which images and artifacts are given new symbolic meanings and local values are re-expressed as Islamic values. Similarly, in some cases ritual recitation of prophetic biography has accompanied recitation of local dynastic histories, as in the old Wolof kingdoms.¹³⁸ Thirdly, Ajami texts provide evidence of the coexistence of local knowledge traditions alongside Islamic ones, whether positively, as seen in the cases of local plant-based and esoteric medicines written alongside Islamic doctrines and medicines in Bamanankan, and the appropriation of local mythological and religious themes in the *Tārīkh Mandinka* of Bijini and the “Pakao Book”, or negatively, as seen in the vehement rejections of *Bori* ceremonies and drumming in Nana Asmā’u’s poetry, which are responses to their popularity. One way of viewing the central position of esoteric knowledge and intervention techniques in Islam in Sudanic Africa is that these offer significant points of intersection with local belief systems that also center on mystical knowledge and unseen forces. The existence of powerful secret knowledge among specialized artisan lineages, and historical accounts of Islamic clerics working to guarantee the success of kings both support this view, at least for Senegambia, Upper Guinea and the Mande world.

In all cases, the analysis of Ajami literatures raises questions, often difficult to answer, about the scope of Ajami literacy in terms of quantity, ability, geography, social

¹³⁸ Henri Gaden, “Légendes et coutumes sénégalaises, cahiers de Yoro Dyao,” *Revue d’Éthnographie et de Sociologie*, 3-4 (1912), 119-37.

class and gender, and other qualifiers, as well as the position of Ajami vis-a-vis literacy in Arabic. The most important source of information regarding such issues is to be found in the original milieus of composition and transmission, where Ajami works have been passed along as parts of broader traditions of knowledge and education like the *Yan Taru*, each with its own parameters of who, and what, is taught. In some cases, the traditions through which texts were transmitted have not remained alive, leaving us with manuscripts without masters or oral versions which are no longer written, as in the cases of the oldest known Hausa Ajami works. In such cases, historical sources can only provide us with indirect evidence as to the traditions in which these literatures flourished. To date, no studies have addressed these questions in depth for any Ajami literary tradition, living or historical.¹³⁹ The importance of Ajami, not only to the spread of Islamic ideas but as a writing system for local languages, has often been marginalized, relegated to passing mentions and footnotes in scholarly works, and to the realm of archaic tradition by educational policymakers.¹⁴⁰

As recent scholarship on literacy has shown, literacy is far from being an autonomous technology with inherent uses and meanings. Instead, literacy must be seen as a cultural practice, one in which the meaning of a text and the act of reading are determined by norms regarding what constitutes knowledge and how it is acquired, relations between

¹³⁹ Mamadou Cisse, "Écrits et écriture en Afrique de l'Ouest," *SudLangues: Revue électronique internationale de sciences du langage*, 6 (2006), 63-88, offers some recent statistics on Ajami literacy: 75% of adults in Diourbel, Podor and Matam districts in Senegal, more than 75% in Labé district in Fouta Jallon including 20 to 25% of women, and up to 80% in Hausaphone regions (77).

¹⁴⁰ Mohamed Chtatou, *Using Arabic script in writing the languages of the peoples of Muslim Africa* (Rabat: Institute of African Studies, 1992), is one example of an attempt by policymakers to make wider use of Ajami literacies; the program, which enlisted a handful of Islamic scholars to design a universal Ajami orthography, attempted to apply a top-down model without adequately taking into account the localized contexts of Ajami knowledge production.

texts and literacy and other sources and systems of knowledge, and the context of literacy activities – where, when, how, and with whom texts are written and read. Additionally, texts are the products of discourses, sets of values and ideas about how the world is ordered which include not only language and symbols, but also styles of speech, dress, posture and other elements of cultural identity and self-representation. Everything which is explicitly stated in a text occurs against a background of discourse, most of which remains unstated or only alluded to.

In light of this ethnographic approach to literacy, it is clear that Ajami literatures can only be understood when examined within their cultural contexts. At the broadest level, this involves an understanding of the discourses, social structures and systems of knowledge present among communities engaging in Ajami literacy. Such information can help us understand how Ajami literacy is acquired, its relationship to Arabic literacy and other forms of knowledge, the uses of different genres of writing, how someone becomes qualified as a writer, and the standards by which the quality and legitimacy of a text is judged. At the level of individual texts, it involves such information as the time, place, and motivations of composition; significant historical events, movements and trends of the time; sources of the themes, images and ideas present within a text; the intended audience; the immediate contexts of instances of reading; and informal instances in which a text, parts of it, or ideas from it are evoked to interpret events, inform social interaction or otherwise give meaning to life. The written text must also be considered in light of the oral discourses surrounding it: in many cases, the written text by itself does not constitute the full text, and a contextualized reading will prove that the written text only points to

more elaborate stores of knowledge, which are often themselves formed into an oral text, equally as codified as the written one and transmitted along with it. The oral text accompanying Nana Asmā' u's "Sufi Women," for example, would edify as to how knowledgeable members of the *Yan Taru* really were about the lives of famous female saints and pious women of Islam, or whether they simply recited the poem to invoke the *baraka* of their names.

Such a thorough ethnographic approach requires thorough research and fieldwork focused on the many layers of a single text. Often, when the lines of transmission have broken, the oral discourses surrounding texts will no longer be available or very difficult to document. Unfortunately, the research constraints of the present study preclude it from addressing such contextual issues as they deserve for the case of Murīd Wolofal literature, and require it to be based primarily at the level of the written text as most previous studies of Ajami literatures have done.

As we have seen, the analysis of Ajami literatures requires knowledge from many disciplines. First, thorough linguistic knowledge of the languages in which Ajami documents are written, usually including archaic "deep" forms, colloquialisms and regional variants, and knowledge of the adapted Arabic script used, are both required to be able to decipher texts. Second, knowledge of Islamic beliefs and practices, of the history of Islamic ideas and social movements with particular attention to Sufism, and of Classical Arabic literature are all required to be able to locate and deconstruct the Islamic references in Ajami documents. Third, a complementary knowledge of local cultural and knowledge traditions is required to locate references to these, understand their

relationships to Islamic ideas, and draw meanings from the contexts of transmission. Finally, a knowledge of local and regional history is required to place ideas in their contexts of changing cultural, social, economic and political circumstances. The studies of Ajami literatures presented in this chapter are the work of scholars who each bring their own strengths to the endeavor: some are primarily linguists who can transcribe and translate, others Islamists who can locate references to Classical Arabic literature, others Africanists with expertise in a particular region, others historians capable of judging the texts as sources. The best studies, however, are those which have gathered information from as many disciplines as possible to offer background to the analysis of their texts.